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“A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF GOVERNMENT  
POLICY ADDRESSING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING”

DOCTORATE IN EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

The issue of early school leaving is currently viewed as a particular concern in Galway City, Ireland. Despite national policy and numerous programmes, early school leaving continues to be prevalent. The central focus of this study is to critically examine government policy addressing early school leaving. Through qualitative methodologies, primary data was collected from students, teachers, principals and education personnel. The student voice was viewed as a significant source of data within the study.

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were completed; sixteen of which were with early school leavers. These early school leavers, defined as having left the school system prior to completing the Leaving Certificate, were aged between fourteen and twenty-one. Sixteen professionals, including teachers and principals, working with schools in Galway City were interviewed.

The study identifies disaffection and early school leaving as significant issues within the Irish education system. Disaffection, while complex, is identifiable among students through aggressive behaviour, disrupted attendance, poor relationships with teachers, lack of interest and non-engagement in academic processes. The research provides evidence that in some cases the education system, rather than alleviating disaffection, is actively perpetuating disaffection which contributes to early school leaving.

Furthermore, through the implementation of Grounded Theory, the contextual issues of socio-economic within families and communities emerged. The research established that current policy aimed at tackling early school leaving is working on the periphery of schools rather than affecting change within schools. The research also highlighted the existence of two original factors which are contributing to the issue of disaffection: 1) Tension among key constituents of the education system and 2) A 'culpability culture' among those who contribute to disaffection and the issue of early school leaving. Recommendations are outlined, including the need for a greater emphasis on inclusive policy and practice within the Irish education system.



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# **CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION - RATIONALE, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

Early school leaving has been identified, both nationally and locally, as an issue of significant concern (Government of Ireland, 2007; Galway City Council, 2002). As a result, over the past two decades national and local policy has focused on reducing early school leaving (Government of Ireland, 1997; Fleming and Murphy, 2000; Downes and Maunsell, 2007). The issue, however, continues to be prevalent in Galway City and throughout Ireland (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008). Therefore, the central focus of this study is to critically examine current policy and programmes aimed at addressing early school leaving in second level education. The research was completed through the collection of primary data from students, teachers, principals and education personnel involved in the area of early school leaving.

The Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) legally requires students to remain within the formal education system until the age of 16 or completion of the Junior Certificate. Within this context, early school leaving refers to the issue of any student who leaves the system prior to reaching the age of 16 or completing the Junior Certificate. However, the second level system operates towards and encourages completion of the Leaving Certificate. As a result, unless otherwise stated, in this study early school leaving refers to any student who has not completed the Leaving Certificate.

The issues of disaffection and inclusive education are in themselves problematic as they conjure up stereotypical images and beliefs. Chapter Two discusses terms such as disaffection, the deficit model of thinking and inclusive education. Disaffection among students includes some or all of the following characteristics: disruptive behaviour, absenteeism, exclusion and falling academic standards generally. It is extremely important to explore disaffection, and related terms, to provide an insight into the factors which impact on students and contribute to early school leaving. Inclusive education and the contested nature of inclusion are also addressed. Irish education policy, in particular policy developed to tackle early school leaving, will be critically reviewed on the basis of inclusion and implementation.

Chapter Three explores educational research with a particular focus on qualitative research methods. Furthermore, positioning within research and the data analysis process are discussed in detail within the framework of this study. The student voice and Grounded Theory are key concepts in educational research; consequently a detailed discussion of these takes place within this chapter.

The data collected is presented, analysed and discussed in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four focuses on the student voice and Chapter Five provides an insight into the views of teachers, principals and related education personnel. Chapter Six draws together the discussion from the previous two chapters and provides recommendations for policy and practice, both locally and nationally.

### Research Questions

- Is current policy effectively addressing early school leaving in Galway City?
- Why are students disaffected from, and leaving, the Irish second level education system prior to completing the Leaving Certificate?

### Subsidiary Research Question

- What factors enhance or inhibit inclusive education in second level schools in Galway City?

### Aims

1. To critically examine government policy addressing early school leaving.
2. To critically examine the concept of inclusive education and disaffection among early school leavers.
3. To carry out primary research with key personnel associated with early school leaving.

### Objectives

1. To review and critically analyse relevant literature in relation to inclusion, disaffection and legislation in Irish education.
2. To identify, select and recruit a sample of early school leavers to participate in the research.
3. To identify, select and recruit a sample of students at risk of early school leaving to participate in the research.
4. To explore the key issues affecting the above students through qualitative research methods.
5. To ascertain the perspectives of a sample of teachers on the key issues in relation to early school leaving.
6. To collate and critically analyse the data collected.
7. To make recommendations to policy makers in relation to early school leaving.

## Rationale

1. The central focus of the study is the promotion of the student voice. Within an Irish education context, a substantial amount of research has been completed in relation to disaffection and early school leaving, with a particular focus on quantitative data. This study will provide a greater level of depth and insight into why disaffection and early school leaving are occurring. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the research will provide a critique of recent policies which have been implemented to tackle disaffection and early school leaving.
2. Since the introduction of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) a significant number of policies and strategies have been developed in Ireland with the specific aim of reducing the number of students leaving the education system early. In spite of policy, recent quantitative research has identified that the number leaving the education system remains at the same high level. This study will provide an insight into the causes of disaffection and early school leaving. The findings of the research will be utilised to progress and influence future policy and legislation. Current policy and programmes will be critically analysed to assess the level of inclusion and implementation.
3. While a significant amount of research has been completed at a national level in relation to disaffection and early school leaving, there is a need to explore these issues within the context of Galway City. This study will analyse similarities and differences to provide a basis for comparison with national and international research. Furthermore, all elements of national policy aimed at addressing early school leaving are present in Galway City, i.e. School Completion Programme, Schools Designated as Disadvantaged, Home School Community Liaison Officers, National Education Welfare Officers and Special Educational Needs Organisers. Therefore, Galway City is well positioned as a research location to critically analyse national policy as well as providing an insight into early school leaving within an urban setting in Ireland.
4. Through my vocational experience, in particular within my current position as an Education Co-ordinator with an Area Based Partnership<sup>1</sup> in Galway City, the issue of

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<sup>1</sup> Area Based Partnerships are local development companies which operate under the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP). Area Based Partnerships bring together Local Communities, Government Bodies, the Social Partners and Elected Public Representatives in partnership approaches at local level. An Action Plan is developed to counter social exclusion (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009).

students leaving school early has been identified as a significant concern in Galway City. This issue has been identified through different fora and among various agencies, services and institutions within Galway City. The primary focus of my current role is the promotion of social inclusion, with young people (students) being a key target group. The rationale for this research has been developed in the context of promoting the inclusion of young people (students) within society. Within this context, education is viewed as an extremely powerful tool in the promotion of inclusion; furthermore, as schools constitute an integral part of the development of inclusion in the city of Galway, this study will pay particular attention to that role.

5. It is important to note that contextual factors such as community profile can impact on inclusion. In a sense, there is an acknowledgement of the impact that societal factors have on early school leaving, which is supported through the current focus within Irish policy on tackling educational disadvantage rather than the promotion of an inclusive education system. While acknowledging the influence of such external issues, the focus of this study will remain on education. The focus of the study is to explore the impact of schools, teachers and in particular current education policy on the issue of early school leaving.
6. Practice and research are often viewed as separate entities. It is my opinion, however, that the combination of practice and research can be mutually beneficial. Ongoing research and reflection can inform practice and vice versa. As a result, this study will allow the development of a research and theoretical framework within the context of my work practice. Through this process, it is anticipated that a greater understanding of the topic of disaffection and early school leaving will be attained; a greater understanding which will inform future practice and research.



**CHAPTER TWO - EXPLORATION OF A  
CONTESTED AREA - AN EXAMINATION OF  
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, EDUCATIONAL  
DISADVANTAGE AND POLICY**

The rationale for the development of this study is the prolonged existence, and consistent levels, of early school leaving in Galway City and throughout Ireland. The research questions are: Is current policy effectively addressing early school leaving in Galway City? Why are students disaffected from, and leaving, the education system prior to completing the Leaving Certificate? My role as an Education Co-ordinator, within an Area Based Partnership, involves addressing early school leaving by tackling social exclusion and educational disadvantage, in line with Department of Education and Science policy. In the absence of any significant change in the numbers leaving school early, it is essential to explore alternatives to current policy and practices in the Irish education system. Accordingly, in order to fully research the issue of early school leaving it is necessary to gain an understanding of, and critically review, the concept of inclusive education. Furthermore, in the context of students continuing to leave the Irish school system early, it is important to critically review current government policy which is aimed at tackling early school leaving. The key topics explored in this chapter are as follows: development of inclusive education; complexity of inclusion - early school leaving, educational disadvantage and disaffection; teachers, teaching and school culture; Irish second level education system; and an analysis of Irish education policy and research.

### **Development of Inclusive Education**

The role of education has long been a contested area. Education can be viewed as a function of society, a training structure for delivering people to the world of work, or as a method of accessing further education. In an international context, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) positions education as having a key role in promoting human rights:

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” (United Nations, 1948, art.26)

While the above declaration provides a focus for education, the Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO, 1990 cited in UNESCO, 2005) sets out the goal in relation to the provision of ‘Education for All’ (EFA). EFA aims to ensure that all children have access to “basic education of a good quality”; therefore, creating an environment in schools and basic education programmes in which children are both able and enabled to learn is essential

(UNESCO, 2005). In 1994 more than 300 participants (including 92 governments and 2 international organisations) developed 'The Salamanca Statement' (UNESCO, 1994). While this 'Statement' focuses on children described as having 'special needs' it also places educational reform firmly within a broader social agenda that includes health, social welfare, vocational training and employment (UNESCO, 1994). Article 2 of this statement identifies the role schools can play in relation to inclusion: "Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 1994, Article 2). Furthermore, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999) (cited in UNESCO and Economic and Social Council, 2003) views education as playing a key role in the attainment of human rights.

In the context of this study the focus is on Galway City; the gathering and analysis of data, however, must be placed in the context of national and international developments within education and inclusion. Policy and practice in Ireland, including Galway City, is influenced by international developments and models of thinking focused on education. Through this study, it is possible to identify where second level education in Galway City is positioned in relation to the above declarations and within the developing area of inclusive education. In advance of such an analysis, a critical examination of what constitutes inclusive education, disaffection, models of thinking and the structure of second level education in Ireland is required.

Before attempting to define inclusive education, it is worth noting that definitions are not empirical, but statements about how one is going to use a term and about the meaning to be associated with it. Wearmouth (2004) believes internationally there is a move towards inclusive education and the provision for a wider range of learners in local mainstream schools. While there has been a suggestion of a greater movement towards inclusive education, it still remains a contested area. However, a lack of consensus remains in relation to an agreed definition of inclusive education. Definitions can be problematic, especially within the field of inclusion and special needs. Sheehy, Nind, Rix and Simmons (2005) reviewed definitions of inclusive education and subsequently identified the following as key elements within inclusive education:

- Inclusive education goes beyond 'special educational needs'; it refers to all learners who, for different reasons, may find themselves at risk of marginalisation or exclusion,
- Inclusive education is about values: it assumes that diverse groups of pupils are of equal worth and have a right to be included,

- Inclusive education does not focus on perceived individual deficits, but on the barriers to learning that individuals and groups of pupils may encounter,
- Inclusive education is about changing the system so it is better for all: including teachers, students and everyone in the educational institution,
- Inclusive education is about participation and learning from each other,
- Inclusive education is not a fixed state but an evolving one (Sheehy et al., 2005, p15).

As noted above, inclusive education is a process in itself, a process which changes to meet the needs of those involved. Sheehy et al. (2005) suggest inclusive education is ever evolving and the ability to define it is restricted. Framing inclusive education as an 'evolving process' can contribute to the level of debate within the area. The evolving nature of inclusion can lead to ambiguity among those involved in the 'implementation of inclusive practices'. Within a UK context, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) (2008) references such ambiguity and confusion:

“While confusion and interpretation are inevitable when social, moral, political and educational perspectives are interlinked, it has to be remembered that teachers have to deliver a workable version of these agendas.” (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, 2008, p9)

The promotion of inclusion and inclusive practices is a contentious issue, one which impacts on those involved in the delivery of education. The key role education has in relation to promoting inclusion within society is evident to me in my position as an Education Co-ordinator within an Area Based Partnership. The specific function of the position is to tackle social exclusion and promote inclusion within educational settings. In a more general sense, the objective of Area Based Partnerships is to reduce barriers to, and increase participation in, employment, education and community development and to promote equality for all. The objectives of Area Based Partnerships are similar to the description of inclusive education forwarded by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) (2002) which emphasises breaking down barriers to learning, increasing participation for all students and treating all learners equally. However, Sheehy et al. (2005) describe inclusive education as the provision of “a framework within which all children, regardless of ability, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin, can be valued equally, treated with respect and provided with real learning opportunities” (Sheehy et al., 2005, p18).

The role of an Education Co-ordinator involves working with schools and Department of Education and Science officials, in both formal and informal settings. Formal interaction occurs via membership of local education committees and informal interaction through attending local education engagements and functions. Throughout the duration of this research a research journal was maintained. The research journal allowed observations, insights and events of interest to be recorded while working with education personnel. The observations, insights and events of interest recorded provide a basis for critical analysis within this Chapter. One such observation is that there is little or no evidence of a clear framework for inclusion, as described by Sheehy et al. (2005), within second level schools in Galway City. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Action Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2005), which is discussed in greater detail later in this Chapter (pgs38-40), references inclusion but does not provide a clear vision or framework for inclusion.

Furthermore, through my participation in the management group of the School Completion Programme (involving principals from primary and secondary schools in Galway City) it is evident to me that, at a minimum, there are inconsistencies within the education system in relation to how students are “valued, respected and enabled to learn” (Wearmouth and Glynn, 2004, p7). Moreover, my links with students and former students would strongly suggest that students are being excluded, through policy and practice, from schools in Galway City. As part of its remit this study will explore the extent to which students in Galway City are valued, respected and enabled to learn within the second level education system. Similar to the ethos of Area Based Partnerships, Lave and Wenger (1991) (cited in Wearmouth, Glynn, Richmond and Berryman, 2004, p326) describe inclusion as learning to become a more effective participant in the practices which impact on education and society. Furthermore, their view supports the need for the student voice within the inclusion agenda. The view taken within this research is that the development of sustainable inclusion can only occur through inclusion of the voice of those excluded, or at risk of exclusion. Therefore, the views of students themselves are central to the development of inclusion through education in Galway City. With this in mind, this research process has provided an opportunity for students in Galway City to voice their thoughts, views and opinions.

Due to my work with second level schools, I have seen that the policy and practice of a school reflects the ethos and models of thinking of the leadership within the school. Thomas, Walker and Webb (2000) indicate that successful inclusive schools have a culture

of acceptance which is supported by leadership within the school. The extent to which leadership exists will impact on the level of collaboration, support and co-operation among school staff. Moreover, Carrington and Elkins (2005) believe the role of inclusive education is about bringing diversity into the school and providing an environment in which all students can progress and achieve their full potential. Within second level education in Ireland, there is a propensity to focus on 'points' and 'third level access'; therefore, the development of a culture of diversity within schools through inclusive education is restricted. Furthermore, teachers, principals, school management, parents, government departments and even students themselves may challenge a shift from a focus on 'academic achievement'.

Wearmouth and Glynn (2004) suggest in order to achieve an inclusive approach a shift in focus is required; this applies in Galway City. The type of shift required, as identified by Wearmouth and Glynn (2004), is one which places responsibility with the school rather than the student, with all students having the right to inclusion in the mainstream class. Inclusion implies that mainstream class teachers need to be committed to this ideology and believe that all students will thrive within the school. As described by Cooper, Drummond, Hart, Lovey and McLaughlin (2000), within an inclusive education framework, students will gain meaningful personal experiences such as "being valued as a person, belonging and involvement, personal satisfaction and achievement, being accepted and listened to" (Cooper et al., 2000, p193).

Inclusive education can be viewed as promoting a model of interaction between teachers and students. Such a model allows the school and school staff to gain an understanding of the student through working with the student. Gaining such an understanding can be developed through building teacher-student relationships. The view taken within this study, as forwarded by Hanco (2005), is that the development of positive relationships requires the use of innovative teaching methods, an effective curriculum and being open to and prepared to teach all children. Furthermore, emotional and behavioural development must be seen as central to the role of education and not, as it is often viewed in the Irish education system, an additional component. However, it is important to highlight that teachers have minimum control over and involvement in policy development. As suggested by the NASUWT (2008), teachers are often involved at 'the coalface' implementing policy and are not party to its initiation or development. Within an Irish context, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is responsible for curriculum development. Teachers implement the curriculum with limited involvement in

its development; however, teachers have power over implementation and hence influence the success or otherwise of the policy.

With this in mind, the views of teachers within this research are seen as key to the promotion of inclusive policy and practices in Galway City. Galway City has eleven second level schools with wide variations in relation to policy and student profile; therefore, each school has differing views on inclusion. Through my vocational experience, specifically my membership of Galway Education Initiative<sup>2</sup>, it is evident that the understanding of 'inclusion' varies between 'provision of supports to specific students with special educational needs' and 'the reduction of barriers to participation in the education system'. The existence of differing ways of viewing, and describing, inclusive education is discussed in detail by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006). They state that inclusion can be defined in a variety of ways; descriptive definitions of inclusion are the variety of ways 'inclusion' is used in practice, whereas prescriptive definitions prescribe the way "one intends to use the concept and would like it to be used by others" (Ainscow et al., 2006, p16). Within an Irish context, ambiguity exists in relation to inclusion, an ambiguity perpetuated through lack of formal clarification in national policy. With this in mind, it is worth exploring six ways of thinking of inclusion as identified by Ainscow et al. (2006):

1. Inclusion as a concern with disabled students and others categorised as 'having special educational needs'. Certainly through my work it is clear inclusion can be viewed as relating to educating students with disabilities, or those categorised as having 'special educational needs', in mainstream schools. Ainscow et al. (2006, p15) question the usefulness of this approach. Inclusion needs to focus on other ways in which participation for any student may be impeded or enhanced.
2. Inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusion. Inclusion can occur as a result of schools being asked to take a disproportionate number of behaviourally 'difficult' students. Inclusion involves overcoming exclusionary pressures. Reducing exclusion involves finding ways to increase participation. Instead of viewing exclusion as a state of being barred from a school, Ainscow et al. (2006, p18) see it as 'processes' that go on within school and society. Exclusion in this broader sense is pervasive and elusive, permeating our cultures and society, the institutions in which we work and the

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<sup>2</sup> The Galway Education Initiative is an initiative developed among schools and relevant agencies in Galway City to facilitate a process of dialogue, planning and action which will ensure that all young people are given the opportunity to realise their full potential, through access to, and full participation in a second level school in Galway City. Currently, the initiative is addressing the issue of transfer of students with special educational needs from primary level education to second level education in Galway City.

aspirations which shape our identities (Ainscow et al., 2006, p18). The model of thinking suggested by Ainscow et al. (2006) is explored in this study through the interview process with the teachers, principals and education personnel.

3. Inclusion in relation to all groups seen as being vulnerable to exclusion. There is an increasing trend for exclusion in education to be viewed more broadly in terms of overcoming discrimination and disadvantage in relation to any groups vulnerable to exclusionary pressures. Ainscow et al. (2006) believe that the addition of 'social' to inclusion and exclusion is unhelpful. It seems to imply that there are forms of exclusion which are not social and perhaps, therefore, natural. Area Based Partnerships operate on the basis of tackling social exclusion. The development of this study will provide a basis to debate the addition of 'social' to inclusion and exclusion.
4. Inclusion as developing the school for all. A rather different strand of thinking about inclusion relates to the development of the common school for all and the construction of approaches to teaching and learning within it. For Ainscow et al. (2006, p20) the notion of the school for all is about a mutually sustaining relationship between schools and communities that recognises and values diversity. The potential for the development of such a school in Ireland is restricted due to the structure and ownership of second level schools. The structure of second level schools is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter (pgs25-27).
5. Inclusion as 'Education for All'. As outlined previously, the 'Education for All' movement was created in the 1990s around a set of international policies focused on increasing access to, and participation in, education across the world. The priorities which require addressing are the barriers that need to be overcome within particular countries and regions. Ainscow et al. (2006, p21) believe that the broad formulation of inclusion may be used to reinvigorate the 'Education for All' movement so that it is genuinely concerned with the participation in education of all within their local community.
6. Inclusion as a principled approach to education and society. From this perspective Ainscow et al. (2006, p22) provide three descriptions of inclusion: (a) "The process of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of local schools", (b) "Restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality" and (c) "The presence, participation and achievement of all students vulnerable to exclusionary pressures, not only those with impairments or those who are categorised as 'having special educational needs'." (Ainscow et al., 2006, p22).



The development of this study provides an opportunity to explore current practices in second level education and the relationship with the theoretical structure of inclusive education. The views of the education personnel working in, and with, local schools will provide an insight into current practices operating within second level education in Galway City. Of equal significance is the examination of the relationship between such practices and the promotion of inclusion within schools. The six 'ways of thinking', expressed by Ainscow et al. (2006), provide a context for such an examination. Furthermore, the students, teachers and principals, through this research process, provide an insight into the effectiveness of current policy within second level schools in the Irish education system.

### Context of Inclusion - Models of Disability

The Disability Movement has been central in the shift towards inclusive education. Key developments within the area of disability which have furthered the 'case' of inclusive education, as well as those noted previously, include the UN Standards Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Disabled Persons (United Nations, 1993) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Rule 6 of the UN Standards Rules relates to education, stating:

“States should recognise the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary education for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the education system.” (United Nations, 1993, p23)

Similar to the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) Article 28 states that “primary education should be compulsory and freely available to all”, while Article 29 states that “education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”. Article 29 illustrates a movement that attempts to shift to a social model away from the precedent of a medical model of thinking. As outlined previously, the Disability Movement has progressed the agenda of inclusion through the development of a rights agenda within education. The Disability Movement, through international declarations, has created an awareness of the need for inclusion of people with disability within society, and more specifically, within the education system. The movement has been constantly evolving and changing, focusing on shifting from a medical or deficit model to a social model of thinking. Such a shift has emerged from the

wider Disability Movement but has particular relevance in the area of education and inclusive education. Moreover, according to Mittler (2000, p3), “this concept of inclusion involves a radical rethink of policy and practice”, a rethink which reflects a shift from a ‘deficit’ to a ‘social’ model.

It is important to note, as described by Reiser and Mason (1992) (cited in Sheehy et al., 2005, p15), that a model is “not necessarily the truth as borne out by scientific fact, just an idea that helps us to make sense of information” (p13). With this in mind, the deficit or medical model of thinking has been hugely influential in shaping the direction of thinking, policy and services for people with disabilities. However, a movement to a social model of disability places the responsibility on systems for creating barriers to the full participation of people with disability (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Similarly, Reiser and Mason (1992) (cited in Sheehy et al., 2005, p15) describe how medical approaches to impairment have given rise to the view that people are individual objects to be ‘treated’, ‘changed’ or ‘improved’ and made more ‘normal’. The medical model of thinking views the individual with a disability as needing to ‘fit-in’, rather than thinking about how society itself might change. It is my view that disability should be viewed more broadly than just physical or mental; students can be disabled by models of thinking “not necessarily the truth as borne out by scientific fact”. Such models of thinking create barriers to student participation in education and can render the student disabled. Table 2-1 contrasts two models of disability and identifies the differences which directly impact on a child’s ability (student’s ability) to participate fully in society (and in school):

**Table 2-1 - Medical Model versus Social Model of Disability**

Medical Model	Social Model
Child is fault	Child is valued
Diagnosis	Strengths and needs redefined by self and others
Labelling	Identify barriers and develop solutions
Impairment becomes focus of attention	Outcome-based programmes
Assessment, monitoring	Resources made available
Segregation and alternative services	Training for parents and professionals
Ordinary needs put on hold	Relationships nurtured
Re-entry if ‘normal’ enough or permanent exclusion	Diversity welcomed; child is welcomed
Society remains unchanged	Society evolves

(Reiser, 2001 cited in Sheehy et al., 2005, p16)

Table 2-1 illustrates the differing models of thinking towards the child. Within the social model of thinking, the child is valued whereas the medical model of thinking places blame on the child. Furthermore, labelling of children occurs within a medical model of thinking, whereas under the social model barriers are identified and solutions developed. Significantly, Table 2-1 introduces the issue of normality. Normality must be viewed as a social construct, which is developed by the 'majority'. Therefore, those outside of the majority are viewed as being outside of the 'norm'. Within a medical model of thinking, there is an approach of re-entry to systems if 'normal' as against the welcoming of diversity within the social model. Also impairment or deficit within the individual becomes the focus of attention rather than outcome based processes. Within an education setting, the medical model of thinking places the responsibility on the individual learners to adapt within a system rather than the system itself changing.

Table 2-1 also introduces the issue of 'deficit'. Through my position as an Education Coordinator, and as described by Thomas and Loxley (2004), the concept of 'need' has come to reinforce these ideas of deficits and disadvantage. While intending to be helpful, it has placed an emphasis on students' difficulties rather than simply naming a supposed category of problems. The notion of need places the emphasis on the child rather than on the system. The current targeted system of supports in operation in the Irish education system, aimed at those with specific needs, can be viewed as contributing to the difficulties of students rather than alleviating them. Identification of a student, or school for that matter, as having specific needs which require increased supports can have the effect of labelling a student, or school.

The existence of a deficit model of thinking within education places the onus of responsibility upon individual learners to adapt or 'fit-in' to the system and by its very nature is exclusionary. A social model of thinking would forward the premise that difficulties in learning occur when there is a mismatch between the starting point for the learner, the expectations of teachers, the teaching methods and resources used. Thus, the system needs to adapt and accommodate the student. The concept of medical versus social models of thinking and their implications are explored within this study. The gathering of data from teachers and principals in Galway City provides an insight into the existence of various models of thinking (Chapter Five, Section: Inclusion and Exclusion) in local schools and the impact such models have on the student experience of second level education. Furthermore, this study provides an insight into the extent to which some students are viewed as 'normal' and others are viewed as being outside the 'norm'.

Moreover, Wearmouth and Glynn (2004) argue that the deficit model of thinking has been assumed in schools in order to maintain order within the institution.

Furthermore, Sheehy et al. (2005) discuss the deficit and social models of thinking in the context of a shift from 'integration' to 'inclusion'. The argument forwarded is that a move from integration to inclusion requires a change in perspective:

“A shift away from a ‘deficit model’, where the assumption is that difficulties have their source within the child, to a ‘social’ model, where barriers to learning exist in the structure of schools themselves and, more broadly, in the attitudes and structures of society.” (Sheehy et al., 2005, p19)

It is unclear whether such a shift in perspective and assumptions has occurred within the Irish school system, but the sampling strata of teachers involved in this study provides a framework for an exploration of current models of thinking which exist towards students, identification of needs and the concept of inclusive education.

### **Complexity of Inclusion - Early School Leaving, Disadvantage and Disaffection**

The complexity of inclusive education needs to be viewed in the context of a plethora of terms and concepts such as educational disadvantage, disaffection, special educational needs and inclusion. Furthermore, it is important to note that concepts such as disaffection, special educational needs and inclusion are interlinked. References to one or all of the concepts within this study must be taken in the context of being closely linked to the other concepts. There is an emphasis on educational disadvantage within Irish education policy. Educational disadvantage is defined within Irish legislation as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage that prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools” (Government of Ireland, 1998, p32).

As well as being problematic, the definition of educational disadvantage places an emphasis on the student, thus perpetuating a medical/deficit model of thinking. In a broader sense disadvantage is acknowledged as the problem but it is viewed as outside the realm of the education sector; education is not seen as part of the system that creates disadvantage. Responsibility is not placed on the schools or the education system for any disadvantage experienced by the student. There would appear to be little recognition

among policy makers of the role a deficit-based system can play in placing individual students at a disadvantage.

The sample group of students in this study is primarily based within disadvantaged areas of Galway City. Furthermore, while not specifically required to identify their ethnic or economic status, there is evidence within the study that the participants are experiencing levels of disadvantage. The types of disadvantage experienced, as suggested by Conaty (2002) and Smyth and McCoy (2009), include some or all of the following: belonging to a minority group, belonging to a low income group, belonging to a group with low educational status, and poor self image (incorporating self-worth and self-confidence).

Lynch (1989) explains the link between social class and education in Ireland, specifically detailing the fact that in Ireland the social class which gains most from the education system is the middle class. As a result, the middle classes are well positioned to have their interests defined as the public interest in education. The consequence of such class division within education is that the lower classes are not well positioned in relation to education. This is particularly evident where there is universal provision of education, as universal 'consumption' is not assured (Lynch, 1989). As a result, education is socially constructed for specific groups and classes, resulting in a lack of inclusion for others. Through my position as an Education Co-ordinator, an insight has been gained into the issue of socio-economic disadvantage among students in Galway City. Students, many of whom (but not all) are from disadvantaged areas of Galway City, are at risk of leaving the education system early. This is reflected through the voices of the students referred by the School Completion Programme to participate in this research (the School Completion Programme has a specific brief to work with students at risk of leaving school early and with schools/communities designated as disadvantaged). While socio-economic factors are outlined, the study focuses on government education policy and the subsequent impact on the issue of early school leaving.

In an Irish context, Shevlin and Rose (2003) identify that "society's emphasis on homogeneity and preference for single approaches to complex issues has resulted in narrow and limited responses to diversity" (p301). Furthermore, they suggest that some students from devalued cultures, such as Travellers, implicitly reject their own identity in order to 'pass for normal'. This results in students being viewed as different, thus finding themselves hovering on the margins of the world of their mainstream peers, isolated and undervalued. With this in mind, inclusion, particularly within education, can play an

important role in allowing students to realise their full potential and participate fully within their community. In the absence of inclusion, as outlined above, students will attempt to detach themselves from their identity and cultural background in order to 'fit-in' within education and society generally, thereby reiterating normality as a social construct and the need for those outside of the 'norm' to 'fit-in'.

In exploring the topic of educational disadvantage further, the term disaffection arises. Similar to inclusive education, the term disaffection is a contentious one with little consensus on a definition. However, Holroyd and Armour (2003) describe disaffection as a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon which has influenced numerous interrelating factors, and can be manifested in various ways including disengagement from mainstream activities, disruptive or antisocial behaviour and involvement in petty crime. In addition, Gutteridge (2002) identifies the following as the major indicators, within a school setting, of student disaffection:

- Often requires reminding about instructions given to the whole class,
- Often does not complete the homework set,
- Uses delaying tactics in class to avoid work,
- Is often reprimanded for talking in class,
- Frequently infringes school uniform requirements,
- Presents substandard work,
- Fails to respond to written comments in his or her exercise book,
- Does not contribute to class discussion sensibly,
- Often forgets to bring books to the lesson,
- Takes no pride in her/his exercise book (Gutteridge, 2002, p165).

As suggested earlier, the behaviours and attitudes associated with disaffection are very much dependent on the school, its culture, management and ethos, together with factors associated with the individual teachers in the school, such as their experience, age, sex and personality (Gutteridge, 2002). As is evident through my professional links with the Galway City Youth Advocacy Service<sup>3</sup> (Galway City Youth Advocacy Service, 2009) and local schools, disaffection within schools can be manifested through active and aggressive resistance within school, official exclusion resulting from resistance, passive resistance, non-cooperation, absenteeism and temporary or permanent drop-out (Harber, 2008). Steer (2000) states that the term disaffection is multi-faceted, referring to a cluster of behaviours,

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<sup>3</sup> Galway City Youth Advocacy Service is a community based service developed to work with students who have left school early. This service is funded through FAS and managed by Galway City Partnership.

attitudes and experiences. In addition, the root of disaffection can be broadly located in poverty, failing of the support services for young people, difficult home circumstances and behavioural and emotional difficulties (Steer, 2000). Therefore, disaffection must be viewed as closely linked to inclusion and inclusive education.

### **Teachers, Teaching and School Culture**

Central to any education-related discussion is 'the teacher'. The role of teachers and teaching in the progress of students within the education system is imperative. It is my view that the teaching approaches, teaching methods and expectations of teachers directly impact on the achievement of students and learning readiness. Such a view is supported by Mittler (2000): "Teachers' perceptions and attitudes present the most formidable obstacles to inclusion and cannot be ignored" (Mittler, 2000, p8). Furthermore, Mittler (2000) identifies the importance of the teacher in the promotion of inclusion within schools and 'summarises' the views of various writers to outline the following in relation to teachers' attitudes to inclusion:

- Most teachers in mainstream schools support the principle of inclusion but many have doubts about whether it will work in their school,
- Teachers are much more positive about the inclusion of children with sensory or physical impairments than about those with emotional and behavioural difficulties or severe learning difficulties,
- Class teachers have less positive attitudes than head teachers but much depends on the credibility of the visiting special support personnel,
- Support for inclusion generally increases once teachers have directly experienced it and they feel the school has the full support of the head teacher and local authorities (Mittler, 2000, p134).

Archer and Shortt (2003) observe that some teachers take pupils' social background into account in assessing their ability. Practices among teachers in which students are labelled and pigeon-holed as being from a specific social background are operating within a deficit/medical model of thinking. Thus, rather than assessing the student's educational needs and striving to meet these, there is a sense that teachers base their expectations on the category or label attached to the student (Archer and Shortt, 2003). In this context, inclusion involves a process of reform and restructuring of a school as a whole with the aim of ensuring that all pupils can have access to the whole range of educational and social opportunities (Mittler, 2000).

As noted above, inclusive education is based upon equality and the rights of students to be fully included regardless of background. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers and their teaching methodologies strive to meet the educational needs of each student and move away from an approach which labels students. Teachers' expectations play a key role in the process of inclusion; if low expectations are present within a school system then the system, in effect, is exclusionary and not meeting the educational needs of all. However, there is a broader context to such labelling and the creation of expectations. The education system, in particular the primary and second level system, operates on the basis of targeted supports/resources (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Department of Education and Science, 2005; McArdle, 2006). Such a system is perpetuating a view of normality and a view of those students who are outside the 'norm'. Certain schools within the system are designated as disadvantaged and are therefore labelled. Furthermore, students who require additional supports must be labelled as having 'special needs' in order to access increased resources. Thus, school management and teachers must create labels to meet the needs of the education system. The Irish education system is perpetuating a system of labelling which in turn is impacting on the expectation levels of school management and teachers.

McCoy, Darmody, Smyth and Dunne (2007), referring to the Irish education system, believe the challenge is to engage students at risk of disaffection with more innovative teaching and learning strategies and to create a greater sense of attachment to and ownership of school life. Students' withdrawal from school reflects disaffection with school life. Feeling alienated and excluded at school, pupils may start disengaging, avoiding school and leaving school prematurely, thus limiting their future life-chances in terms of access to the labour market (Darmody, 2007). In addition, teachers' expectations may be lower for some groups of students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Gutman and Midgley, 2000 cited in Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004, p7).

### Selection and Allocation of Students - The Streaming Process

Streaming, a process whereby students in a particular year are assigned to higher- or lower-stream class groupings on the basis of some type of attainment measure (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007), is viewed as contributing to disaffection among students (Smyth, Dunne, McCoy and Darmody, 2006). The rationale expressed for such a process is that there are 'concerns' in relation to the suitability of the curriculum for lower ability students and difficulties in covering the curriculum in the time available (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004). Such an approach is particularly isolating for specific students and plays a



significant part in disaffecting the students involved. The decision of a school to operate a system of streaming is, in effect, limiting life choices for students at an extremely early age.

Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004) have identified the existence of streaming within second level schools in Ireland. The level of streaming within Galway City has not been formally documented. However this research explores the issue of streaming among the schools involved in the sample group (Chapter Five, Section: School Culture and Systems). Within this research, streaming is viewed as a method of promoting segregation among students in Galway City. Streaming can be used to develop a 'class system' within schools which acts as a source of division and segregation (Department of Education and Science, 2007). Furthermore, as suggested by Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004), schools should be encouraged to develop alternative approaches to streaming. The existence of a streaming system within schools can hugely limit a student's opportunities in the long-term, regardless of the level of progress they may achieve (Department of Education and Science, 2007). Therefore, the streaming process labels the student. As discussed above, the labelling of students can impact on the teachers' expectations which in turn can limit the students' participation and progression in second level education. However, as suggested by Lynch (1989), streaming can be viewed as a method of supporting class division within society. Schools are, in effect, perpetuating a system of promoting students from certain social classes, i.e. upper and middle classes, while suppressing students from other classes, i.e. lower class.

The issues affecting not only students at risk of leaving school early, but all students, can be complex. The level of inclusion, or exclusion, experienced can vary depending on the models of thinking in place in relation to socio-economic circumstances, cultural background (Lynch and Lodge, 2002) and family structure (Millar, Coen, Rau, Donegan, Canavan and Bradley, 2008). Irrespective of non-school factors, schools are generally viewed as a focal point for the process of inclusion. Consequently, school management and ultimately teachers are seen as key to the implementation of the inclusion agenda. As identified previously within this study, schools are often viewed as the location for inclusion to be enacted. Schools, and in particular teachers, are given a central role in the movement towards inclusive practices. The 'positioning' of teachers at the 'core' of the inclusion process, without due consultation and training, can result in a reluctance among teachers and schools to fully participate (NASUWT, 2008).

The evidence presented in Chapters Four and Five provides an insight into the views of teachers, principals, education personnel and students in relation to the teachers, teaching and culture among schools in Galway City.

### **Second Level Education System - Ireland**

The Irish education system is complex, particularly the primary and second level system. It is not possible to provide a complete analysis of the structure of the education system within this study, but it is imperative that some reference to the historical development of the system, in particular the ownership and management of schools, be provided. The church has been deeply involved in the Irish education system and has a significant influence on the nature of educational patterns in Ireland. The education system is predominantly state aided, with the state providing the vast proportion of finance for capital and current expenditure, although most of the institutions are not publicly owned or controlled: “The state, through the Department of Education<sup>4</sup>, exercises a preponderant role in determining educational policy” (Coolahan, 1981, p141). Furthermore,

“The Department of Education exercises varying degrees of power and influences over the different educational institutions but its overall influence on educational policy and administrative procedures is very great.” (Coolahan, 1981, p160)

As this study focuses on second level education, the types of second level schools in Ireland are examined. The oldest type of second level school is the secondary school. Secondary schools form the largest category of post-primary schools and cater for about two-thirds of second level students. Secondary schools are private institutions and almost all are denominational. In order to be eligible for state support they must be recognised by the Department of Education and Science as offering an approved curriculum and as complying with rules set out by the Department (Coolahan, 1981). Secondary schools are owned by religious groups and run under the auspices of religious authorities. There are eight secondary schools in Galway City: two all-boys schools, two co-educational schools and four all-girls schools.

There are three other types of second level schools in Ireland: Community, Vocational and Comprehensive. Community schools provide comprehensive second level education facilities in one school for all the children in the second level age range in the area and are

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<sup>4</sup> The Department of Education subsequently became the Department of Education and Science.

intended to have much closer links with their surrounding communities than is usual with schools (Coolahan, 1981). The running costs of the schools are completely paid for by the state. There are two Community Schools in Galway City which are under the aegis of the City of Galway Vocational Education Committee (VEC), one of which teaches exclusively through Irish. Both schools are co-educational.

Vocational schools offer a full second level programme of instruction for pupils in the age range twelve to nineteen. They also provide more specialised technical and apprentice education for particular trades and professions and provide evening classes for adults in a very wide range of subjects (Coolahan, 1981). There is one vocational school in Galway City which is under the aegis of the City of Galway VEC. However, this school focuses completely on Post-Leaving Certificate courses and no longer delivers the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The fourth type of school is Comprehensive schools. These schools were established, and are fully funded by, the state. There are a very limited number of such schools in Ireland and none in Galway City.

The complex nature of the Irish education system, particularly at second level, provides a context for the development and implementation of education policy in Ireland. Secondary schools, through their Boards of Management, are in a position to develop specific policy and practices which are deemed appropriate for their school. Therefore, policy development within the Irish education system is a complicated and contested area. Breen, Hannan, Rottman and Whelan (1990) believe Irish public policy (including education policy) did not establish effective control over the institutions that were central to policy implementation. Lynch and Moran (2006) reiterate the lack of effective control of policy within an Irish education context:

“Schools are generally managed and controlled by middle-class and upper-middle-class people (trustees, boards of governors, teachers, professionals from local authorities, etc.), to whom the survival of the school has been entrusted.” (Lynch and Moran, 2006, p226)

Furthermore, Hannan, Smyth, McCullagh, O’Leary and McMahon (1996) note that half of all second level students do not attend their nearest school; those who are most mobile are middle-class students. The findings of the *Equality and Power in Schools* (EPS) study (Lynch and Lodge, 2002) demonstrate that the issues and problems associated with choice are not confined to the system or policy level; schools are autonomous entities interested in

their own survival. Therefore, the implementation of education policy must be placed within the complexity of the structure and history of the Irish education system.

### Progression of Policy - Historical Development in Ireland

The overview of the system provides a context to policy in Ireland. In order to answer the research question effectively there is a need to review the development of policy within the Irish education system. On the formation of the state, the Department of Education was established by the Minister and Secretaries Act (1924) (Glendenning, 1999). Following this, the School Attendance Act (1926) was brought into law (Glendenning, 1999). This legislation required children between the ages of six and fourteen years to attend school, unless it could be established that they were receiving 'a certain minimum education' in the home (Glendenning, 1999). The School Attendance (Amendment) Act (1967) was enacted with the purpose of expediting the serving of warning notices on parents of children who were absenting themselves from school, of facilitating the presentation of the child before the court and increasing certain fines imposed by the 1926 Act (Glendenning, 1999). A period followed in which change occurred in relation to education legislation in Ireland. The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Government of Ireland, 1993) reported that: "Ireland has a conspicuous lack of legislation governing much of educational provision but particularly covering education provision for students with special needs" (Government of Ireland, 1993, p56).

The committee identified gaps in curriculum development, constraints at primary level, drop-out at post-primary level, insufficient specialist training for teachers, and a lack of contact and interchange between the ordinary and special education systems. The SERC report (Government of Ireland, 1993) marked a shift towards more inclusive strategies and the mainstreaming of education service provision, which included the implementation of a significant amount of new legislation including the Education Act (1998) (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) (Government of Ireland, 2004). The Education Act (1998) was particularly significant as it set the scene for educational reform but also because it was the first piece of legislation in the area of education in decades. The Act defines the function of the Minister for Education and Science to provide a quality education and appropriate support services for people with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN). The Education Act (1998) states: "There is made available to each person resident in the state, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level

and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person.” (Government of Ireland, 1998, p10).

### Special Education in Ireland

“Special education, and those considered to be in need of it, are shifting rather than fixed constructs.” (Riddell, 2007, p34)

Special education, similar to inclusive education, is a contested area and as a result there is no one agreed definition. In Ireland, prior to the work of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC), special education in Ireland was provided in special schools and, since the 1970s, in separate special classes in mainstream primary schools (Government of Ireland, 1993). The SERC report (Government of Ireland, 1993) found that ordinary and special education operated in virtual mutual isolation. Since the publication of the SERC report (Government of Ireland, 1993), the Department of Education and Science policy has increasingly promoted mainstream provision for children with disabilities and/or SEN through the development of The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004). The EPSEN Act was viewed as a significant piece of legislation for students with special educational needs. The central purpose of the Act was to ensure inclusive education unless there are specific reasons why a specialised placement is required for the child. The EPSEN Act is critically reviewed later in this chapter.

Griffin and Shevlin (2007) acknowledge the progress which has been achieved for children with disabilities and special educational needs in Ireland. In contrast Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) caution that “despite the visible increase in resources, a consistent, systemic approach to special educational provision has not emerged ... There is a real danger that the specialist teacher can become responsible for the whole inclusion process” (Shevlin et al., 2008, p149). Furthermore, they argue for inclusion within mainstream:

“Schools require systemic support, opportunities for professional development and the dissemination of existing good practice. Mainstream education has to be the responsibility of all in the school system and as a result everyone in the school needs to be better qualified to deal with an increasingly diverse school population.” (Shevlin et al., 2008, p149)

While the inclusion of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs is central to the inclusive education movement, inclusion is broader and needs to focus on the participation of any student that may be impeded from full participation within the education system.

### **From Policy to Practice - An Analysis of Irish Legislation**

In advance of developing any level of analysis, it is important to define policy and examine how to assess policy in practice. Policy can be defined:

“...as ‘a guideline for achieving objectives’ which are enacted through a process or procedure or set of rules as part of a systemic way of working. If objectives are ‘what we want to achieve’, policy is the ‘how’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ of meeting objectives. In addition, underpinning any policy is the belief system behind those objectives.” (Sheehy et al., 2005, p72)

The implementation of policy can counteract or inhibit the implementation of other policies (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002 cited in Sheehy et al., 2005, p72). The analysis of policy must occur in the context of legislation and other existing policies which are in operation. The intention of policy on its development and the reality of its implementation/enactment can differ. This ‘intention-reality’ gap can lead to tension, particularly among those involved in implementing education policy (Sheehy et al., 2005). Furthermore,

“What is valued in educational policy at one time and place can be different in different contexts, so it is inevitable that there will be differing economic and ideological values of education and how it is delivered, depending on time and place.” (Sheehy et al., 2005, p73)

As outlined previously, legislation has been developed including the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). Moreover, it is important to note that the education system in Ireland operates within a context of broader socio-economic inequalities and that addressing social exclusion, or promoting social inclusion, is central to social policy in Ireland (McVeigh, 2006). In addition, a succession of strategies have been developed in Ireland, including the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) in 1997 (Government of Ireland, 1997) and the

revised NAPS in 2002 (Government of Ireland, 2002), which emphasise the promotion of social inclusion generally including educational disadvantage. Such strategies specifically identify the key role education can play in tackling poverty and social exclusion. On the basis of my professional interaction within the legislation and a detailed review of each document, a critical examination of the legislation is presented.

### The Education Act (1998)

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) includes definitions of disability, special educational needs and educational disadvantage. The definition of disability includes terms such as ‘loss of a part of the person’s body’, ‘chronic disease’, ‘malfunction, malformation or disfigurement’ and ‘a condition, illness or disease which affects a person’s thought process’. The legislation also includes the term ‘special educational needs’, which is defined as “the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students”. While the introduction of the legislation was generally welcomed, along with the attempts to include the concept of educational disadvantage, the language and content of this legislation reflects a medical model of thinking. The educational responses reflect a medical model of thinking which focuses on individual deficits as a means of identifying needs. The inclusion of terms such as ‘illness’, ‘disease’ and ‘malformation’ within this legislation reinforces this model.

As outlined previously, Irish education policy focuses on tackling educational disadvantage; consequently, there is an emphasis on addressing external factors, or ‘non-school’ related factors, which are impacting on the students’ experience within school. In contrast, inclusive education operates on the principle that “local schools should provide for all children, regardless of any perceived difference, disability or other social, emotional, cultural or linguistic difference” (Florian, 2008, p202).

Educational disadvantage is referred to throughout Irish education policy, with a distinct absence of reference to inclusive education. Therefore, tackling educational disadvantage, rather than promoting inclusion, is a priority of the Department of Education and Science. There is a clear lack of reference to a student-centred approach in which the system is required to change to meet the needs of the student.

### Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (2004)

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) introduced the concept of special educational needs into Irish legislation, but the Education for Persons with Special

Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland, 2004) is a particularly significant document within the Irish education system. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) develops on the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) defining ‘special educational needs’ as the following:

“A restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition, which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.”  
(Government of Ireland, 2004, p6)

This definition is much broader than any previous definition of ‘disability’, ‘intellectual disability’, ‘learning disability’ or any other of the commonly used descriptors of those whose learning needs were perceived to differ from their peers (National Council for Special Education, 2006). The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) confers a right on the child with special educational needs to an appropriate education in an inclusive setting. In addition, it confers on the child certain specific rights, including the right to an assessment of needs and an educational plan. The nature of the appropriate inclusive education to be provided, the assessment to be undertaken and the educational plan to be prepared and implemented will be differentiated based on the needs of the individual child (National Council for Special Education, 2006).

While this Act has progressed the area of special educational needs within the Irish education system, there are limitations to the legislation. It provides resources and support for students with special educational needs within schools, but one of the key consequences of such an approach is that certain students are labelled within the education system as having specific educational needs. Labelling students as having special needs in effect highlights the individual as special and thus remains deficit-based (Thomas and Vaughan, 2007). This labelling emphasises differences, excludes, and highlights the existence of a ‘deficit’ model within the Irish education system. These approaches are linked directly to the issue of disaffection and early school leaving among students.

While the area of inclusive education is a contested one, it is vitally important that when the term is included in legislation a clear definition or description of its meaning is provided. Without such a clarification, the opportunity for ambiguity between policy makers and policy implementers will exist. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004)



introduces and promotes the concept of inclusive education but fails to provide a clear definition of inclusive education. In the absence of a definition, implementation of elements of the legislation will be completed based on individuals' professional or personal understanding of inclusive education. Such ambiguity results in the intention of the legislation being lost in reality 'on the ground'. The 'initiation phase' of such policies will have a specific intention but in the absence of 'absolute' clarity this intention will become ambiguous through the 'implementation' and 'institutionalisation' phase (Sheehy et al., 2005).

Despite the progressive nature of the legislation in an Irish context, the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) still makes references to a medical model of thinking. This is particularly evident within the assessment section of the legislation according to which an assessment may be carried out by one of the following:

“A psychologist; a medical practitioner; the principal of the school which the child is attending or a teacher of that school nominated by the principal; an appropriately qualified social worker; and a therapist who is suitably qualified to provide support services in respect of the special educational needs of the child.” (Government of Ireland, 2004, p10)

The involvement of non-education/medically focused professionals in the assessment of education needs emphasises the continued existence of a medical rather than a social model of thinking. Barton (2003) believes that in seeking to take voices of disabled people seriously it is necessary to understand the contexts in which they are expressed, the content of these voices and the purposes of such expressions. A social model of thinking recognises that the question of disability provides us with an opportunity for raising serious questions about the nature of the society we live in and the kind of society we desire or hope for. The mainstream view within society of what constitutes normality impacts on the development of a social model of thinking. The function of this research is to identify and attempt to answer specific questions, such as why are students continuing to leave the education system despite the influx of recent policy? What are the views of students, teachers, principals and other education personnel in relation to inclusive education? The data collected explore these questions.

Shevlin and Rose (2008) comment that special education legislation provides for the child to be directly involved in the formulation and implementation of the education plan. The

team charged with preparing the education plan can include “the child where this is considered appropriate by the special needs organiser having regard to the age of the child and the nature and extent of the child’s education disability” (Government of Ireland, 2004).

It is critical that children with disabilities and/or special educational needs are enabled to be active participants in their education, otherwise there is a real danger that they will remain on the margins of mainstream schools and on the periphery of society (Florian, 2007). Legislation has tended to explicitly state a commitment to the development of inclusive learning environments. When comparing Ireland and England, Shevlin and Rose (2008) believe that in each country there are difficulties in translating this commitment into practice. There appear to be problems at the conceptual level, as well as challenges in securing appropriate resources. These problems would suggest the existence of a gap between intention and reality in the area of special education. Chapter Five of this document discusses in detail the implementation of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) based on the data collected from the sample group.

#### Education (Welfare) Act (2000)

The Education (Welfare) Act was introduced in Ireland in 2000 (Government of Ireland, 2000). The legislation developed a National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) with the following general functions: ensuring that each child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education, to assist in the formulation and implementation of policies and objectives of the government. The legislation includes developing a register of young people who have left school, developing plans for young people registered in relation to education and training, and advising and assisting children and the parents of children who exhibit problems relating to the attendance at, and behaviour in, school.

At the time of the introduction of the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) it was evident to me from my professional interaction with school personnel and services/ agencies operating in Galway City, specifically through the management group of the School Completion Programme<sup>5</sup>, that the legislation was broadly welcomed on the basis that it created a definitive, and legislative, framework for dealing with the issue of

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<sup>5</sup> Under the national guidelines for the development of School Completion Programmes, Education Co-ordinators are required to become members of the management group of the School Completion Programme in their local area. There are two School Completion Programmes in Galway City (Eastside and Westside).

non-attendance at school. However, the full implementation of the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) has not taken place. The resources and staffing required to implement the legislation have not materialised (National Education Welfare Board, 2006; Children's Rights Alliance, 2009; Society of Saint Vincent De Paul, 2009). The function of monitoring attendance in association with the school has progressed but other elements, such as the development of a register of young people, development of plans for these young people and strategic support for schools in the management of behaviours, have not progressed due to the lack of resources. On further investigation the legislation focuses on the students' non-attendance rather than on the role of the school in working with individual learners. The legislation, in line with the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), focuses on the family background of the student. While making reference to the role of the school, the Act states that parent(s) will be served with a school attendance notice:

“(a) requiring him or her on the expiration of such period as is specified in the notice, to cause his or her child named in the notice to attend such recognised school as is specified in the notice, and there to attend on each school day that the notice is in force, and

(b) informing him or her that if he or she fails to comply with a requirement under *paragraph (a)* he or she shall be guilty of an offence.”

(Government of Ireland, 2000, p22)

The ultimate sanction lies with the parent(s) of the student regardless of the level of inclusion, or exclusion, which the student experiences within the school. It raises further questions in relation to policy developed to resolve the issue of attendance at school in Ireland. It is evident from the content of the legislation that the approach in the Irish education system is to punish, rather than exploring the causes of non-attendance and developing appropriate resourced responses. While full resourcing of any legislation is limited, it is evident from my direct and indirect work with the NEWB that the service has never been resourced to the level required to fully implement legislation. Consequently, the legislation developed to tackle absenteeism has been extremely limited in its effectiveness.

### **From Policy to Practice - An Analysis of Non-Legislative Policy**

The subsequent analysis of policy must be viewed in the context of Critical Theory. Ward (2010) describes Critical Theory as an investigation of the structures and processes of power and oppression that lie masked behind the common realities of everyday life.

Furthermore, Critical Theory tries to reveal how these structures and processes continue to predominate what we need to change to achieve greater social equity and justice (Ward, 2010). Held (1980) states:

“The extension and development of the notion of critique, from a concern with the conditions and limits of reason and knowledge (Kant), to a reflection on the emergence of spirit (Hegel), and then to focus on specific historical forms – capitalism, the exchange process (Marx) – was furthered on the work of the Frankfurt theorists. They sought to develop a critical perspective in the discussion of all social practices.” (Held, 1980, p16)

Brookfield (2005) describes Critical Theory through five distinctive characteristics:

1. Critical Theory is firmly grounded in a particular political analysis. Horkheimer (1995) (cited by Brookfield, 2005, p23) states that a single existential judgement is at the heart of Critical Theory. This is that the commodity exchange economy comprising capitalism will inevitably generate a series of tensions created by the desire of some people for emancipation and the wish of others to prevent this desire being realised. The commodity exchange economy determines all human relationships.
2. The second distinctive characteristic draws on the writings of Horkheimer (1995) (cited by Brookfield, 2005, p25). Critical Theory is concerned with providing people with knowledge and understanding to free them from oppression (Brookfield, 2005, p25). Its explicit intent is to galvanise people into replacing capitalism with truly democratic social arrangements. Critical Theory is clearly transformative and exists to bring about social change. This research is operating in the context of creating social change through retaining students at risk of early school leaving within the education system.
3. The difference between Critical Theory and other theories is that it breaks down the separation of the subject and object, of researcher and the focus of research found in traditional theories Horkheimer (1995) (cited by Brookfield, 2005, p26). The validity of Critical Theory derives from the fact that its subjects – human beings, specifically those diminished by the workings of capitalism – support the philosophy vision of society inherent within the theory.
4. The fact that it is normatively grounded is Critical Theory’s fourth defining feature. Critical Theory tries to generate a specific vision of the world that might be Horkheimer (1995) (cited by Brookfield, 2005, p27). This grounding of Critical Theory in a preconfigured vision and set of values opens it to criticism that it is not a

genuine theory but a set of preferences, prescriptions and platitudes. An issue acknowledged by Horkheimer (1995) (cited in Brookfield, 2005, p28).

5. Critical Theory is distinctive because we won't know whether Critical Theory is true or false until the world it envisages is created and we can judge its relative humanity and compassion (Horkheimer, 2005) (cited in Brookfield, 2005, p29).

Focusing on education and in particular teaching, Brookfield (1995) outlines four 'lenses' through which critical reflection can take place:

1. Our Autobiographies as Learners and Teachers. Brookfield (1995, p29) states that consulting our autobiographies as learners puts us in the role of the 'other'. We see our practices from the other side of the mirror, and we become viscerally connected to what our own students are experiencing. Through personal self-reflection, we become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasonings that frame how we work. Once these are established, we can start to test their accuracy and validity through conversations with students, colleagues, and books (Brookfield, 1995, p29). Throughout this research, but particularly in Chapter Three, self reflection, positioning and the 'autobiography' of the researcher is described.
2. Out Students' Eyes. Seeing ourselves as students makes us aware of those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationships in the classroom. They also help us check whether students take from our practice the meanings that we intend (Brookfield, 1995, p30). This research provides students with the opportunity to outline their experiences of second level education in Galway City (Chapter Four).
3. Our Colleagues' Experiences. By inviting colleagues to watch what we do, or by engaging in critical conversations with them, we can notice aspects of our practice that are normally hidden from us. As they describe their readings of, and responses to, situations that we face, we see our practice in a new light (Brookfield, 1995, p30). This research provides education personnel with the opportunity to outline their experiences of second level education in Galway City (Chapter Five).
4. Theoretical Literature. Theoretical literature can provide multiple interpretations of familiar but impenetrable situations. It can help us understand our experience by naming it in different ways, and by illuminating generic aspects of what we thought were idiosyncratic events and processes (Brookfield, 1995, p30). The research journal and the review of literature within this research has facilitated such critical reflection.

The critical analysis of policy, and specifically the School Completion Programme, takes place in the context of the outlined descriptions of Critical Theory. Furthermore, the “tensions created by the desire of some people for emancipation and the wish of others to prevent this desire being realised” (Horkheimer (1995) (cited by Brookfield, 2005, p23) are explored within the data analysis in Chapters Four and Five. Moreover, this research is operating within the context that:

“Each of the critical theorists maintained that although all knowledge is historically conditioned, truth claims can be rationally adjudicated independently of immediate social (e.g. class) interests. They defend the possibility of an independent moment of criticism.” (Held, 1980, p15)

### Context for Early School Leaving Policy in Ireland

As outlined by Fleming and Murphy (2000), “early school-leaving, as a manifestation of educational disadvantage, has become a priority in national policy over the last 15 years” (Fleming and Murphy, 2000, p9). The prioritising of early school leaving in national policy manifests itself in the development of an extensive list of programmes (see Appendix One) being implemented in second level schools including the School Completion Programme.

The focus of the Department of Education and Science on educational disadvantage has resulted in schools within disadvantaged areas receiving increased funding, resources and programmes. Consequently, the education system has developed a system of targeted supports to specific schools, primarily those operating within areas designated as disadvantaged. In my work, I have seen that the allocation of such resources is completed primarily on the basis of targeting those who need the most support. The potential, and emerging, consequence of such a policy is the further segregation and exclusion of those identified as both educationally and economically disadvantaged. From an inclusion perspective, the system of tackling educational disadvantage can be viewed as reinforcing disadvantage rather than addressing it. Through the development of a system of disadvantaged schools for disadvantaged students, a parallel system of non-disadvantaged schools for non-disadvantaged students develops. Thus, an unequal and divided education system emerges.

The education policy of the Irish government is enacted through the development of different programmes and supports delivered locally in disadvantaged schools and, to a lesser extent, non-disadvantaged schools. The development of different programmes and supports has resulted in a fragmented system. In an attempt to address the fragmented nature of the programmes being implemented, the Department of Education and Science developed an Action Plan to merge all programmes. The action plan is titled *DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools): An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion* (Department of Education and Science, 2005).

The aim of the DEIS action plan is to ensure the education needs of students from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed. A key function of DEIS is to place all the schemes and programmes, which have been operating in isolation, within one structure. The official documentation states that the action plan is “grounded in the belief that every student deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education, each person should have the opportunity to reach her/his full educational potential for personal, social and economic reasons and education is a critical factor in promoting social inclusion and economic development” (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p15). While DEIS refers to equality and social inclusion neither are defined or developed to any great extent. Therefore, the programmes outlined within DEIS, including the School Completion Programme, are working towards equality and social inclusion in the absence of any clear vision of equality, social inclusion and inclusive education.

### Content and Analysis of the School Completion Programme

Within a Critical Theory context, a critical examination of the School Completion Programme is presented. The critical examination of the programme was completed through two methods a) reviewing the official documentation relating to the programme and b) observations and insights recorded of the programme in the research journal. The School Completion Programme is viewed as a key response by the Department of Education and Science to tackling early school leaving. Therefore, it is important that the School Completion Programme be critically analysed within this study. However, the analysis of the programme must be viewed bearing in mind that the data collected through the sample group within the study do not specifically relate to the School Completion Programme. Nevertheless, its relevance and critical analysis of the programme will inform the research process.

On the establishment of the School Completion Programme, the retention figure within the Senior Cycle was 81.3% (Department of Education and Science, 2005). The number of students leaving school early was, and is still, occurring despite a significant amount of resources going into the area of educational disadvantage. Furthermore, DEIS was developed in the context of previous programmes and schemes operating independently within schools. Programmes operated with minimal co-operation among schools, particularly between primary and second level schools. The focus of the School Completion Programme is on those who are at risk of educational disadvantage and leaving school early (Department of Education and Science, 2005).

The schools involved in the School Completion Programme are required, in collaboration with representatives of local statutory and voluntary agencies, to devise focused and targeted integrated plans in the holistic support of students at risk. The School Completion Programme, which incorporates the learning, experience and best practice emerging from two previous pilot initiatives, provides a wide range of targeted supports on an individual and group basis to students who may be at risk of early school leaving (Department of Education and Science, 2005). The types of supports range from social and personal development to after-school and out-of-school supports, including sport and leisure activities as well as supports that target the young person's home and community life (Department of Education and Science, 2005). These supports are aimed primarily at targeted students, with little opportunity for whole school initiatives. Such an approach can be viewed, within a school setting, as labelling students receiving the support and compounding the issue of exclusion rather than tackling it.

The DEIS action plan states that the School Completion Programme should be formally evaluated (Department of Education and Science, 2005). Despite this recommendation the programme has not been formally evaluated. Furthermore, in the absence of a formal evaluation of the first phase of the Programme, further schools were added to the programme in 2007 in a second phase. The School Completion Programme has been in existence since 2001, with four schools (one secondary school and three primary schools) in Galway City being involved in the initial round of the programme. When the programme was expanded in 2007, the number of schools included in Galway City increased to three secondary schools and ten primary schools in total. While there has been anecdotal evidence of the benefits of the programme, no formal analysis of these benefits has taken place. As a result, there is little evidence, if any, that elements of the programme are proving particularly effective and how these could be replicated within the



education system. In addition, the expansion has occurred within a context of continuing levels of early school leaving; since the programme began in 2001 early school leaving remains at a consistent level of 14 per cent (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008).

A significant issue within the School Completion Programme is that the programme operates within schools but is not integrated into the work of the school as a whole. The School Completion Programme is working with the most disaffected students within the system but the programme does not involve the classroom teachers nor their approaches to working with the student. Consequently, the School Completion Programme operates on the periphery of schools and school policy. This approach limits the capacity of the programme to tackle school policy and practices which appear to contribute to disaffection among students. Florian (2008) suggests that educational practices should be reviewed and an examination of how teachers work in their classrooms should be undertaken. However, this programme provides another outlet for teachers to withdraw students from the class for support resulting in teachers not acquiring the skills to work with, and include, students at risk of leaving school early.

The programme does not refer to inclusive education; rather it outlines barriers to the educational progress of students caused by issues outside the education system: “These barriers can be financial, family and health related, social/communal, cultural and geographic or a combination of any of these” (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p16). The above statement describes issues outside of the education system which are barriers to the educational progression of students. Therefore, policy reiterates the emphasis on tackling educational disadvantage, rather than the promotion of inclusive education within the Irish education system. At no stage within DEIS, and more specifically within the School Completion Programme documentation, is there an evaluation of the system itself and the role which the school and/or the Irish education system plays in creating barriers to the educational progression of students. The exclusion of any analysis or description of barriers to progression within the Irish education system further places blame on external factors. The document also states that:

“The objective of the education system is to provide a broadly based, inclusive, high quality education that will enable individuals to develop to their full potential and to live fulfilled lives, as well as contributing to Ireland’s social and economic development.” (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p15)

Hence, there is an acknowledgement of the need for an inclusive education system but there is no description or guidance of what this should involve. As noted previously, inclusion in an education setting is not defined or developed to any great extent. Furthermore, there is no underlying principle provided for the implementation of inclusive practices within the School Completion Programme or specifically within schools. Within DEIS, and more specifically the School Completion Programme, there are no specific guidelines in relation to an inclusive framework around which such a programme should operate. Consequently, there is no vision of how schools could operate in an inclusive manner; each programme and school can operate completely independently, without any strategy or vision for inclusion in an education setting.

Through the analysis of legislative and non-legislative policy there is evidence of the ‘intention-reality’ gap identified by Sheehy et al. (2005). Chapters Four and Five of this study provide an insight into the extent to which the identified ‘intention-reality’ gap within the education system impacts on students, teachers, principals and policy makers.

### **Early School Leaving - Profile in Ireland**

In the context of much policy focus, and considerable resources allocated towards combating early school leaving and educational under-achievement, a School Leavers’ Survey Report has been published based on those who left school in the academic year 2004/05 (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008). The School Leavers’ Survey Report operates within a quantitative framework providing a context for, and a basis for comparison with, this study. The report provides a significant insight into current levels, and profile, of early school leaving in Ireland. The principal findings of the report are:

- The percentage of early school leavers remains relatively constant and gender differences in educational attainment persist. A larger proportion of males continue to exit the education system at an earlier stage relative to females. The proportion of males exiting the second level system without sitting the Leaving Certificate examination is 8 percentage points higher than for females (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008). On the basis of the results of the School Leavers’ Survey the profile of the sample group within my study reflects the fact that significantly more males than females have left the school system early,
- Socio-economic differences in second level education completion are particularly evident. Young people from professional, employer-manager and farming backgrounds

continue to have significantly higher educational attainment than those from other socio-economic backgrounds,

- Persistent truancy is much more prevalent among those who leave school prior to completion of the Leaving Certificate examination,
- In relation to attitudes towards school, school leavers who complete post-compulsory education are more likely to have positive views of the support they got from their teachers and are considerably more likely to consider their classroom environment as orderly (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008, pxii).

As highlighted within the rationale for the development of this study, 86 per cent of school leavers in the 2007 survey had completed the Leaving Certificate, 12 per cent had completed the Junior Certificate before leaving school while 2 per cent left without any qualifications (never completing any official second level examination) (McCoy, Kelly and Watson, 2007). The percentage of those leaving school without the Leaving Certificate has fallen steadily since the late 1980s. In 1980, 9 per cent of students left with no qualifications and 31 per cent left after the Junior Cycle. By the 2008 survey, the corresponding figures had dropped to 2 per cent and 12 per cent respectively, so that the proportion leaving school on completion of the Leaving Certificate had risen from 60 per cent to 86 per cent between 1980 and 2007 (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008). Therefore, 14 per cent of students who enter the education system currently do not complete second level education.

The survey (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008) also explored, among those who left school prior to completing the Leaving Certificate, the key factors which influenced their decision to leave school early:

“It is clear that the overriding factors influencing a student’s decision to leave school relate to ‘school factors’ (62 per cent), followed by ‘economic or work factors’ (60 per cent), ‘family factors’ (14 per cent) and ‘health factors’ (5 per cent).” (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008, p13)

The survey identifies school factors as the primary reason for leaving school early; while introducing economic factors as a particular issue. As highlighted previously, the 2008 School Leavers’ Survey is based on those who left school in the academic year 2004/05. The economic environment in Ireland during that period of time was extremely favourable

towards gaining employment. More significantly, the results emphasise the impact external economic factors have on the issue of early school leaving rather than current policy. The qualitative nature of this study provides a depth of knowledge and insight specific to Galway City, which is absent from the quantitative report compiled by Byrne, McCoy and Watson (2008). Furthermore, through the student voice, this research provides an opportunity for students in Galway City to outline their reasons for leaving school early. The research also allows the students to provide a context for, and details of, their decision to leave school early. The student voice is presented and analysed within Chapter Four of this document.

### Conclusion

Inclusive education is a contested area with many differing views and opinions as to what the key characteristics are. Certainly the inclusive education movement has progressed mainly within the context of developments in the Disability Movement. As inclusive education has progressed it is evident that any further progress is dependent on the development of inclusive practices within education settings. The evidence within this chapter is that not all students are being fully included within the Irish education system. Furthermore, normality as a social construct impacts on the level of inclusion which exists within society. Students are presenting with the key characteristics of disaffection which relate to lack of inclusive policies and practices within the education system. The characteristics of disaffection include lack of interest, aggressive behaviour, absenteeism, non-participation and exclusion. Certain contributing factors have been identified such as approaches of teachers, streaming, curriculum, lack of understanding of special educational needs and lack of inclusive policies within schools.

Within an Irish context, research supports the belief that early school leaving and disaffection exist within the education system. The ongoing existence of such issues is in the context of the implementation of specific policies and strategies to tackle disaffection and early school leaving. There is an overwhelming focus on educational disadvantage; such a focus places the responsibility on non-school factors rather than exploring an inclusive approach to tackling early school leaving and disaffection. The Irish education system has seen a raft of legislation in the past two decades following the absence of any legislation for numerous decades. Consequently, the full implementation of the legislation has been limited, fragmented and incomplete. In reality, the intention of the legislation has not been developed. The implications of the gap between intention and reality are

explored further within Chapters Five and Six. In advance of this, Chapter Three explores research methodology and the research design for this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY**

With a particular focus on second level education, the purpose of this research is to critically examine government policy addressing early school leavers in Galway City as well as to explore why students are disaffected from, and leaving, the Irish education system prior to completing the Leaving Certificate. To ensure this research responds to the above question it is imperative that current literature within educational research is explored as well as literature relating to qualitative research. The importance of the student voice is also discussed.

The rationale for exploring disaffection and early school leaving has emerged from my work as an Education Co-ordinator in Galway City. Through my position I work directly, and indirectly, with second level schools in Galway City to tackle the issue of early school leaving. Despite the development of national policy, delivered through local programmes, to address the issue, early school leaving continues to remain at a consistent level of 14 per cent per annum within the Irish education system (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008). Through this practitioner research, a greater knowledge and understanding has been sought as a means of informing current and future policy. Furthermore, through my vocational experience I have found that significant levels of quantitative research, both national and international, have been completed on the topic of early school leaving. Subsequently, in order to access the data required to answer the research questions, qualitative methods were viewed as the most appropriate for this study.

While references are made to some quantitative research methods in the chapter, qualitative research methods are the primary focus. The quantitative research completed in Ireland has been discussed in the previous chapter and has informed the analysis and discussion chapters of the document. This chapter will discuss the following: educational research, positioning within research, student voice, research design sampling, location of research, data analysis and ethical considerations.

### **Educational Research**

Research has been described as creating new knowledge, finding ways of testing its validity and sharing knowledge for specific purposes. Specific to the area of education, Hammersley (2002) believes the benefit of research lies more in terms of raising questions about current assumptions, and supplying alternative perspectives on the work of teachers, education managers and policy makers and on the context in which they operate. As identified within the rationale for this research, current thinking within schools in Galway City, and the education system as a whole, need to be challenged. Models of thinking, as

outlined in Chapter Two, have been deficit in their nature within the Irish education system (Kitchin and Mulcahy, 1999; Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2005) and are contributing to the issue of early school leaving (Lynch, 2002). The role of an Education Co-ordinator, as prescribed by national policy, has primarily focused on working with and supporting schools in addressing early school leaving. However, through the completion of this research, the role of an Education Co-ordinator shifts to a position of challenging current policy, developed by the education system, aimed at addressing early school leaving. There is a significant challenge to engage key stakeholders within the education system, such as teachers and principals, in a process of change from current approaches and deficit models of thinking to more inclusive practices and positive models of thinking.

Through my vocational position, a level of knowledge and understanding has been gained of the issue of disaffection, early school leaving and current policy aimed at addressing early school leaving. Put simply, the nature of the problem is, as outlined in the literature review, that the needs of a particular group of students are not being fully met within the second level education system (Chapter Two, Section: Early School Leaving – Profile in Ireland). However, a greater level of knowledge and understanding is required and has been sought through this research. Integral to gaining such knowledge is the methodology utilised within this research. Bassey (1999) supports such a view:

“Systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and wisdom about the experience and nurture of personal and social development towards worthwhile living and the acquisition, development, transmission, conservative discovery and renewal of worthwhile culture.” (Bassey, 1999, p39)

It is my belief, similar to the belief held by Cordingley (2004), that challenging current thinking and policy within the education system can be progressed on the basis of completing formal educational research. The dissemination of the recommendations from this research, both locally and nationally, can provide a platform to allow me as an Education Co-ordinator to influence teachers, principals and policy makers. Such a process will enable educators to develop the kind of sound knowledge base and characteristics which ensure education develops a maturity and sense of progression (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2003). Within the complex nature of educational research, the intention of this research is to investigate and progress the issue of inclusive education in Ireland and specifically in Galway City. As outlined previously, research



with a quantitative focus on early school leaving has been completed. In contrast, this research provides a qualitative analysis. The qualitative focus provides an opportunity for the student voice to inform the debate on, and critically analyse, the issue of disaffection and early school leaving.

Criticism expounded by Hargreaves (1996) suggests educational research does not make a serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge and is irrelevant to practice. Such a claim must also be challenged through the dissemination of the findings and recommendations of this research. Furthermore, Hargreaves (1996) argues that much educational research is non-cumulative, in the sense that it does not explicitly build on earlier research and is not found useful by teachers. The rationale for this research has been identified as adding depth to the large amount of quantitative data which exists on the topic of early school leaving. Additionally, through the involvement of school staff, as well as students, there is an implicit usefulness to this study. Developing on this, Hammersley (2002) argues that part of the problem while working under the auspices of academic disciplines concerned with contributing to theory, is that researchers have also sought to address the changing political agendas that define pressing educational problems. In this context, it is important to discuss my positioning within the research.

### **Positioning within the Research**

Hammersley (2006) discusses the position and focus of research arguing that it is difficult to see what other adequate basis there could be for social research other than the principle of value neutrality, believing that taking sides within research is effectively to take sides against it. Hammersley (2006) believes it involves either an appeal to false values or a systematic deception whereby political activists work under the cover of research. The focus of this study is on the issue of early school leaving. However, informing policy and practice to ensure inclusion of those most disadvantaged in society is one of the key reasons why this study was initiated. As discussed in Chapter Two, education is viewed as having a significant role in the empowerment of individuals and groups of individuals to create change within their own lives and communities. With this in mind, the rationale for this study is not to deceive but to inform and create a greater understanding of why early school leaving exists within Irish education, and more particularly in Galway City.

In advance of outlining the challenges I faced in this research, it is important to explore current theory on positioning within research. Hellowell (2006) has described in detail the positioning of the researcher. The position of a researcher can lie within a continuum

varying from being an insider to an outsider. 'Insider' in simple terms is where the researcher has a specific insight into the topic being researched; an 'outsider' conversely has no insight into the topic. However, the distinction is not, and cannot be, as simple as outlined previously. The concept of an insider-outsider continuum in which a researcher will move between the two is far more appropriate. In the context of this study I, as a researcher, moved along the insider-outsider continuum throughout the process. Worthy of note is Hammersley's (1993) viewpoint on the insider-outsider concept: he believes there is no specific advantage to being an insider or an outsider, with both positions having advantages and disadvantages. Even with this in mind, it is important that any positions be noted and stated by a researcher.

This research process has developed out of personal interest and experience in the area of student disaffection, along with vocational responsibilities to tackle the area of early school leaving in Galway City. Within my professional role, there is a responsibility and requirement to work with local schools and agencies. These links ensure familiarity and formal relationships with senior management, principals and specific teaching staff in schools in Galway City. Therefore, insights have been developed in relation to the structures and approaches of these schools. Interviews took place with a random sample of the school staff as part of this study. With this in mind, I was placed in a position of being an insider. However, a certain number of teachers interviewed as part of this research were not familiar with the researcher and vice versa. As a result, when interviewing these individuals it could be argued that I was placed in a position of being an outsider.

A significant influence on my positioning in this research process was my vocational and personal background in the encouragement of the student voice. The student voice has always been a central focus and priority within my vocational career. It is imperative that students can influence decisions and policy which directly affect their position within the education system and society as a whole. Through my vocational experience and promotion of the student voice, relationships have been developed with those individuals involved in addressing the issue of disaffection and more specifically students affected by this issue. Students involved in this research may hold an 'impression' of the researcher as an individual who works with and on behalf of young people. This involvement placed me as an insider within the research.

In contrast, I am not based in a school or directly involved in policy development; as a result the positioning of the researcher again changes. In this context, I was an outsider.

Furthermore, as a male researcher, the gender of the interviewee within the research may also dictate the position along the insider-outsider continuum. Moreover, having completed primary, second and third level education my view of education and its importance within society may be different to those involved in this study, especially the students. Therefore, from different perspectives and at different occasions throughout the research the researcher will move along the inside-outsider continuum. Within this research project, the positioning moves from being an insider to being an outsider. Furthermore, based on the above discussion, and similar to Simmons (Sheehy, Rix, Nind and Simmons, 2004), I believe I hold multiple and often conflicting perspectives. Through reflection, reflexivity and maintaining the previously mentioned research journal such perspectives were explored and challenged throughout the research process.

Hellawell (2006) argues that a mixture of both empathy (insider) and alienation (outsider) are good qualities for a researcher to have. The researcher is thus well placed to complete the data collection required for this study. Hellawell (2006) also noted that the need for reflexivity within research is imperative. A key element of reflexivity within this research was facilitated through the completion of a pilot study. The pilot study was completed in the first twelve months of the research. The pilot study was completed with four early school leavers; two referred by Dochas Don Oige (a Training Centre for early school leavers in Galway City) and two referred by Galway City Youth Advocacy Service. Two interviews took place in the Dochas Don Oige Training Centre and two interviews took place in the offices of Galway City Partnership. The pilot study provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on the research process and the observations of the researcher. In particular, the pilot study provided an opportunity to test the type of questions (open and closed), the language within the questions and the question format. The pilot study provided the opportunity to observe the types of responses received from questions and the reaction of the students to questions which may have been viewed as potentially sensitive or invasive. The following are some of the observations noted and decisions made following the pilot study:

- Further specific questions needed to be included in relation to the supports available within schools to students at risk of leaving school early as well as questions which relate to disaffection,
- In relation to the student voice, while the pilot study provided a substantial amount of data, on reflection, the interviewer must allow increased opportunity for the students to express their opinions, thoughts and ideas,

- Re-phrasing of specific questions was required in order to make them more open-ended and allow students to express their opinion, thoughts and ideas,
- Interviews should take place in a venue/room which is conducive to allowing the interviewee speak freely and honestly,
- The need to complete the research with teaching staff is vital in order to ‘balance’ the data being collected. Teachers were consistently highlighted in the data collected as part of the pilot study and as a result their viewpoint on the issue of early school leaving is imperative. The recommendations outlined above for the interviews with the students will have to be fully considered in advance of completing the research with the teachers,
- The need to complete research with the school principals, specifically in relation to the area of policies, was identified. This element of the primary research will address the issue of the intention-reality gap in relation to policy. Principals have a leading role in the implementation of national policy, along with the development of policy, within schools.
- The students did not react negatively to any of the questions asked. Therefore, the questions included were not deemed to be overly sensitive or intrusive.

The reflections outlined and the ongoing level of reflection which took place within this study ensured the research remained relevant, informed and focused on the key aims and objectives outlined previously. Furthermore, the research process has significantly developed the skills of the researcher in relation to reflection and the ability to complete research within the education sector.

This research took the position of ‘value of neutrality’, as highlighted by Hammersley (1993), and more specifically focused on the need to address the issue of disaffection and early school leaving. Eisner (1993) and Philips (1993) have contrasting views on the objectivity/subjectivity of research. Eisner (1993) questions objectivity, while Philips (1993) emphasises the importance of seeking objectivity. Acknowledging the merits of the arguments put forward by both Eisner (1993) and Philips (1993), this research will involve a process of actively interpreting and constructing knowledge and is a constructivist paradigm. While Eisner (1993) may view this as contributing to the subjective nature of the research, my view is that the practitioner nature of the research has allowed access to a greater depth of data and the opportunity for the voice of students to be constructed.

### Construction of Knowledge

As this research developed, the issue of human knowledge, and more particularly how knowledge is constructed, became more prominent. The specific process of gathering data has highlighted the need to explore how the knowledge of the interviewee and the interviewer is developed. Constructivism is a key concept within education research. The central idea of constructivism is that human learning is constructed and that learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning (Hoover, 1996). Constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it.

Schwandt (2003) (cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) believes that we do not construct our interpretation in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understanding, practices, languages, and so forth. It is important within a research context to acknowledge the 'construction' and 'interpretation' the interviewer places on data received from the interviewee during the process of an interview. During the process of completing this research it became evident that I shared an understanding, knowledge of practice and language with those who participated in the research. While the process illustrated that I had a shared knowledge, understanding and language with the students and the teachers/principals/education personnel, it also became evident that the same shared knowledge, understanding and language did not exist between the students and the teachers/principals/education personnel. The lack of shared knowledge, understanding and language presented itself in the form of tension.

The emergence of such tension placed an even greater obligation on me as a researcher to remain neutral. The construction and interpretation of information had to be managed through reflexivity within the research process. The process provided a challenge to me as a researcher to retain a position of neutrality within each interview and with each interviewee. The retention of a position of neutrality in the context of constructing and interpreting the information was also a challenge throughout the research. The challenge remained throughout the research process, particularly as the tension continued to be presented within the data. Furthermore, the process of coding and analysing the data emphasised the existence of such tension.

Within this research process, it is important that such construction is acknowledged. In addition, it is evident that we are self-interpreting beings and that language constitutes this being (Schwandt, 2003 cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Schwandt (2003) (cited in

Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) also states that the qualitative inquiry movement is built on a profound concern with understanding what other human beings are doing or saying. Adams (2006) outlines that social constructivist epistemology locates knowledge not as an objective, context-devoid discovery, but rather as a contextually driven intrapersonal creation. The relationship I had with the interviewees was viewed as contributing to the research process. The level to which I developed, or had, a relationship with the interviewee determined the level of engagement in the process. The extent of the shared knowledge I had with the interviewee certainly created the context for the interview process. The types of knowledge shared included professional (awareness of role/responsibility, previous roles/responsibility, understanding of the role/responsibility of the researcher) and personal (socio-economic background, opinions and beliefs, family profile). Within this research the greater the level of shared knowledge, the greater the level of engagement in the interview process.

Creswell (2003) describes constructivist researchers as addressing the 'processes' of interaction among individuals, focusing on the specific contexts in which people live in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Furthermore, the role of the researcher is highlighted in how individuals recognise their own background, how this shapes their interpretation and this originates from their own personal, cultural and historical background (Creswell, 2003). My socio-economic background within full-time employment, positive experience of the education system and privately owned house in an affluent area of Galway City shaped my interpretation and understanding of the sample group, who are primarily located within lower socio-economic groupings, and the subsequent research data. Furthermore, my professional responsibility places me in a position of promoting the voice of those excluded from the education system.

The constructivist view is particularly important within this research as knowledge is constructed by both the researcher and by the individuals involved in the process. The 'interpretations' of the data by the researcher within this research were constructed and with this in mind, the reflexivity element of this research was a particularly important process. Throughout the research process a series of notes and comments were maintained in a journal which provided a mechanism for reflection and reflexivity. The journal included observations, thoughts and ideas with each being recorded on a regular basis. Through these observations, thoughts and ideas, I was in a position to contextualise the research and reflect on my role as a researcher and as an Education Co-ordinator.

## **Student Voice**

The student should be viewed as central to the education system. From my role as an Education Co-ordinator, it has been evident to me that the opinions and needs of the student are often viewed as secondary to the needs of teachers, principals, schools and the education system itself. In contrast, Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states: “Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (United Nations, 1989, art. 12).

The need for individual, family and community involvement has been central to the concept of inclusion. The benefits of including such groups are cited as involvement, ownership and empowerment along with the fact that these groups are ‘experts’ on their situation. One such group is young people who are at risk of leaving or who have left school early. Hight (2003) considers these as ‘experts’ on their own lives. Furthermore, as a result of being ‘experts’, they retain the right to have their voices heard and opinions sought in matters affecting them. Good practice in relation to the development of inclusion promotes the voices of those affected by exclusion. As an Education Co-ordinator, I have always viewed the involvement of those affected by exclusion as invaluable in the development of appropriate responses and meeting the needs of ‘groups’.

While the benefits of the inclusion of the student voice are introduced in the previous paragraph, Gilligan (1993) has explored in detail the importance of voice from a psychological theory and women's development perspective. Gilligan (1993) states that her work “is grounded in listening” (Gilligan, 1993, pxiii). Furthermore, Gilligan (1993) states:

“By voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and cultural. It is composed of breath and sounds, words, rhythm, and language. And voice is a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds.” (Gilligan, 1993, pxvi)

Gilligan (1993) views the importance of voice in the context of feminism suggesting we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice the silence of women but the

difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak. Referencing Freud and Piaget, Gilligan (1993) calls our attention to the differences in children's feelings and thoughts, enabling us to respond to children with greater care and respect, so a recognition of the differences in women's experience and understanding expands our vision or maturity and points to the contextual nature of development truths (Gilligan, 1993, p174).

The valorisation of voice, particularly the voice of women, as forwarded by Gilligan (1993) illustrates the significance which is placed on the voice of individuals and groups of individuals. The inclusion, or non-inclusion, of such voices has great significance in psychological, social and cultural order (Gilligan, 1993, pxvi). While this research is not positioned to assess moral/ human development, the inclusion of the voice of men and women within this research must be viewed as providing an imperative perspective on, and insight into, schools in Galway City, the education system and consequently human relationships.

Within the context of education, the voice of the student should be central to any reform in relation to schools. Students are often seen as the recipients of education, whereas in fact they are an integral part of the education system. Fielding and Ruddock (2002) claim that listening to the student voice can offer:

- A stronger sense of membership (the organisational dimension) so that students feel more positive about school,
- A stronger sense of respect and self-worth (the personal dimension) so that students feel positive about themselves,
- A stronger sense of self as a learner (the pedagogic dimension) so that students are better able to manage their own progress in learning,
- A stronger sense of agency (the political dimension) so that students realise that they can have an impact on things that matter to them in school (Fielding and Ruddock, 2002, p5).

Furthermore, Fielding and Ruddock (2002) put forward that in the last twenty years schools have changed less than students have changed and schools need to reflect the different capabilities of this new generation of young people. Any changes which are proposed for schools, or education in general, need to involve the views of the students. The benefits of listening to the student voice is emphasised by Mitra (2004) who believes that the student voice can consist, on the most basic level, of young people sharing their opinions regarding problems and potential solutions.



This research takes the view, as stated by Smyth and Hattam (2001), that there is a requirement to understand how those who leave school early construct their experiences, emphasising the need to allow students to speak in their own language about topics such as teaching methods, learning and school culture. In addition, there is a need to understand why students 'refuse' to engage with schools and are disaffected (Smyth and Hattam, 2001). Furthermore, as suggested by Mitra (2004), the involvement of students, in particular students failing subjects or rarely attending school, in the process can make it more difficult for school personnel to shift the blame of failure onto students. This issue of blame emerges as a particular issue within this research; the inclusion of the student voice can provide an insight into such 'blame' but more significantly it can play a role in the removal of such 'blame'.

Fielding and Ruddock (2002) believe that in order to "judge the potential of student voice for change we need to know who is talking and who is listening and whether such attentiveness is customary or spasmodic, an entitlement or a dispensation" (Fielding and Ruddock, 2002, p2). Students with views on teaching and learning often do not feel able to talk without a framework that allows comments and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome their comments and not retaliate (Fielding and Ruddock, 2002). As suggested by Rose and Shelvin (2003), the focus of this study is to place value on the student voice and to encourage others, including those in positions of power, to do likewise. In the absence of a voice within the education system, the involvement of students in research may be the most powerful mechanism of availing of their knowledge and insights. In a Galway City context, the methodology developed within this research will provide a perspective on second levels schools which was not previously available or sought.

While emphasising the need for students' perspective in research, Nieto (2005) also believes that this type of research is especially significant in multi-cultural education because the student is inherently at the centre of the field. Students' views have important implications for transforming the curriculum, pedagogy and for educational reform in general. A further implication is in the area of diversity; in order to create value diversity in education systems it is important to listen to young people from marginalised groups and really hear their perspectives and concerns (Shevlin and Rose, 2003). However, Hancock and Mansfield (2002) believe that teachers may be unwilling to listen to or promote the student voice as they believe that "expertise and knowledge lie outside the contexts in which they work. This will make them less inclined to look to themselves or colleagues for

ideas and solutions or, indeed, to see children as partners in the educational process.” (Hancock and Mansfield, 2002, p185).

With this in mind, it is important to note that the promotion of the student voice can be viewed as challenging and ‘dangerous’. The Annual Conference (2008) of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) condemned the use of students to evaluate teacher performance through lesson observation and saw the assessment and interviewing of teachers as an attack on their professional status. Furthermore, the conference called upon the National Executive “to continue its campaign to inform members about the inherent dangers of involving students in such processes and to urge them to oppose this in all schools and colleges” (NASUWT, 2008, p7).

To conclude, the need to provide an opportunity to listen to the student voice is imperative in order to ‘legitimise’ and inform research on the topics affecting students. Through this research process the voice of students in Galway City was expressed and analysed in the context of the views of education personnel and current national policy. Furthermore, the validity/valorisation of voice must be viewed in the context of creating social and political change; this research is attempting to create such change.

### **Research Design**

The issues that prompted the research questions have emerged from my experience as an Education Co-ordinator in Galway City. Central to this role is the need to probe and explore issues relating to early school leaving and identify options which can contribute to the experience of students within the school system in Galway City. Furthermore, Galway City, through different schools, implements all elements of national policy aimed at addressing early school leaving. Therefore, Galway City is well positioned as a research location in order for the researcher to critically analyse national policy as well as providing an insight into early school leaving within an urban setting in Ireland. The research is not intended or designed to represent all early school leavers, but rather to present the qualitative experiences of a cross section of early school leavers in Galway City.

The research design is a qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research is “a commitment to some vision of the naturalistic, interpretive approach to its subject matter” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p13). The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities, on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially

constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between researcher and what is studied and the situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p13). In contrast, Bell (1997) describes quantitative research as collecting facts and studying the relationship of one set of facts to another. Moreover, quantitative research uses scientific techniques that are likely to produce quantified and generalised conclusions. The qualitative perspective is more concerned with understanding individuals' perceptions of the world and seeking to gain an insight rather than a statistical analysis. Within this context, as a researcher my beliefs and view of the world shaped this research process. My experience of the education system, which has been largely positive, influences my view of education. While operating within this worldview, the use of qualitative research allows the worldview and perspectives of students, teachers and principals in Galway City to emerge.

Empirical studies, particularly in relation to the issues of early school leaving, can be quantitative or qualitative in nature, with the sources of information being the students themselves, the school and governmental organisations (Beekhoven and Dekkers, 2005). Within an Irish context, far greater amounts of quantitative research exist relating to the topic of early school leaving. The education system, through the daily collection of attendance and completion statistics, facilitates a quantitative research approach. However, taking into the account the views of Hoepfl (1997) that qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context settings, qualitative research was viewed as the most appropriate when exploring disaffection and early school leaving. Furthermore, in seeking to gain meanings, experiences and descriptions, the study operated within a qualitative framework:

“A qualitative research report will contain raw data and summaries of it, analysis, inference and, in the case of participant observation, perhaps feelings and reactions of the observer at the time significant events occurred. These are all valid components for inclusion but it is important that analysis, inference and feelings are clearly separated and labelled as such.” (Coolican, 1990, p236 cited in Open University, 2003, p218)

The qualitative nature of this study places a strong emphasis on the experiences and descriptions of the key parties involved in second level education in Galway City. The depth of information provided through a qualitative research process allows particular insights into people's lives to be highlighted.

In order to effectively capture such insights, an embedded case study will be presented within the data. It is hoped that the qualitative data and the presentation of an embedded case study will provide an insight into the contributory factors to students leaving school early in Galway City and as a result can provide insight into what should be included in future policy which may be developed to tackle early school leaving.

### Case Study

In analysing data or presenting a descriptive and evaluative account of a single case study Bassey (1981) concluded that:

“An important criterion for judging the merit of a case study is the extent to which details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision-making to that described in the case study. The reliability of a case study is more important than its generalizability.” (Bassey, 1981, p85)

One of the central reasons for including a case study is that if reported or described intelligently and in plain English it can be readily understood and has the potential therefore to be accessible to a greater audience. Furthermore, a case study can capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation. The lessons learned from case studies are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or institution (Yin, 2003).

The inclusion of an embedded case study in this study must be viewed as strengthening and adding to the presentation of the data in Chapter Four. It is hoped that the presentation of an embedded case study will provide an insight into why students are leaving school early in Galway City and as a result an insight can be provided into what should be included in future policy which may be developed to tackle early school leaving. The embedded case study included is about a student called Dean (pseudonym), who provided a rich and detailed insight into his experience within formal education in Galway City.

### Interviews as Research Tool

As outlined previously, this research is positioned within a qualitative paradigm. As noted by Wainwright (1997), qualitative researchers have a number of techniques at their disposal for data collection, including non-participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviewing. In particular, interviewing is a key methodology in the area of

qualitative research. In view of the profile of the sample group within this research, in particular the involvement of students, the adaptability of interviewing was viewed as a key rationale for using this research tool within this study. Bell (1997) has suggested that a skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which would be outside the scope of a questionnaire. These are the key skills I focused on throughout the research process.

Problems can arise with the use of interviews. Interviews can be time-consuming, subjective and therefore susceptible to bias. Analysing responses can present problems and wording the questions is almost as demanding for interviews as it is for questionnaires. Even so, the interview can yield rich material and provide a greater depth to the responses from questionnaires (Bell, 1997). Wragg (1978) emphasised the importance of the location of interviews. In particular with students, it is important to do this away from peers, in whose company they often feel they must play a certain role. Within this research, the location of interviews was viewed as central to facilitating the interviewee to speak in an open and free manner. For each interview, the interviewee chose the location for the interview. As a result, the locations for interviews included individuals' homes, community centres, schools and coffee shops. Operating within the context of child protection and following the appropriate guidelines as documented by my employer and those of the British Educational Research Association (2004), in each case, both the interviewer and the interviewee were always visible to at least one other adult; an adult who was known to both the interviewer and the interviewee.

It is my view, similar to the view of Wainwright (1997), that the testimony of respondents amounts to much more than simply checking that they are telling the truth; it entails looking at the processes that shaped their views and assessing the extent to which they may be distorted by ideology. O'Hanlon (2003) describes interviews as a direct and flexible form of interaction which can elicit information in which the interviewer can pursue responses on the spot, request elaboration or redefinition of a response and probe attitudes or feelings at greater depth than using other research techniques. On this basis the interview was identified as the most appropriate tool for this research. In line with the views of O'Hanlon (2003), I completed the following as part of the research process:

- Developed a detailed interview schedule and a means of its interpretation in advance. In this study, the interview schedule was developed in conjunction with the services working with students and with local schools and education personnel. The questions

within the interviews were developed based on the aims and objectives of the research and reviewing relevant literature, in particular Boldt (1997),

- Piloted the interview schedule, to test the questions and practise interview skills. The pilot study, as outlined earlier in this chapter, allowed the questions and interview structure to be tested and reflected upon,
- Ensured that leading or biased questions were absent. The pilot study explored this issue and as a result any related issues were avoided in the main study,
- Asked questions related to the interviewee's background and experiences utilising language the interviewee would understand. Through the pilot study, the language used was deemed as appropriate and subsequently similar language was used in the main study.

The concepts and methodologies discussed within this chapter were incorporated into the approach of the researcher when completing the interviews. The use of interviews allowed the gathering of comprehensive and personal information from the sample group in Galway City. Furthermore, the use of interviews provided an opportunity, particularly with students, for expansion and clarification of issues as they emerged through the process. The research process not only illustrated the need to provide students with an opportunity to outline their experiences within the education system, but that within a 'secure' environment students had the capacity to express themselves in an extremely informed manner. Moreover, the interview provided the students with an opportunity to give 'their side of the story'.

The research method implemented was semi-structured interviewing, which is described as when "the interviewer uses a guide in which set questions are covered, but can prompt for more information" (Green, 2006, p53). In this research, each interview followed a pre-planned format with flexibility to elaborate on relevant issues as highlighted by the interviewee through using closed and open-ended questions. The use of semi-structured interviewing allowed for themes which related to the aims and objectives of the research to be probed and explored in greater detail than possible through non-qualitative approaches or fully structured interviews. The information being sought, in line with the aims, objectives and research questions, included the following from the student: personal details, aspects of school enjoyed and not enjoyed, description of behaviour in school, description of attendance record in school, support received in school, general discussion of experience in school, when and why they left school and their view of school staff. On the basis of inclusion and a non-targeting approach, students were not asked to identify

their ethnic or economic status within the interview; although the data collected would reveal some aspects of this.

The information being sought from teachers, principals and education personnel, in line with the aims, objectives and research questions, included the following: job responsibility, school culture, system of allocation of students, supports for students, curriculum and teaching, views on students at risk of early school leaving, views on current policy relating to early school leaving and education. Each participant consented to have the interview recorded for subsequent transcription.

### **Sampling and Sample Group**

Sampling can be a problem within educational research. The choice of subjects for use in the research lies between a random sample, an opportunity sample and a representative sample. The main groups involved in the research include students, teachers, principals and specific education personnel. A representative sampling procedure was used to select the teachers and principals through inviting all schools in Galway City to participate in the research; those who expressed a willingness to participate were focused upon. In addition, views of staff members from the Department of Education, Vocational Education Committee (VEC) and education agencies in Galway City were sought.

In relation to educational research Wragg (1978) has identified sampling as a problem. “A single or few respondents may be atypical, a cast of thousands may be equally unrepresentative or badly selected” (Wragg, 1978, p5). In this research, the choice was between a random sample and an opportunity sample. An opportunity sample consists of those whom it is convenient to interview, either because they are willing to talk or because they come your way through formal/informal professional contact. The focus of this study is on the issue of disaffection and early school leaving and the most appropriate sample for the study was a random sample. However, the services involved in identifying the students for the research did so on the basis of when students were in contact with the service and an ‘opportunity’ presented itself. Therefore, the sample must be viewed in the context of an opportunity sample.

### **Sample Group of this Research**

Thirty-two interviews in total were completed as part of the study. The process of identifying and accessing the sample group is described in detail (pgs63-64).

## Students

- Research gatekeepers are those who may give permission for research to proceed (Homan, 2002). In this study, gatekeeping was viewed as contributing positively to the research through avoiding bias by the researcher in relation to the selection of the students and ensuring students disaffected from the second level education system were provided with an opportunity to participate in the research. Consequently, four services working directly with students at risk of leaving or who have already left the second level school system were written to informing them of the research (Appendix Two),
- The co-ordinator of each service was contacted by telephone,
- Each service agreed to participate in the research process,
- Through a formal meeting, each service was informed of the aims and objectives of the research. Furthermore, the co-ordinators of each service were informed of the ethical considerations,
- The co-ordinator of each service identified students who would be available for interview. It is important to note the number of males involved in these services is greater than females which reflects the gender breakdown within national statistics. Thus, this study has a greater number of males than females,
- The researcher contacted and got consent from parents of students under 18 (where relevant),
- Prior to each interview, the student (aged over 18) was informed of the content of the interview and was asked to sign a consent form,
- Each student signed a consent form and agreed to be interviewed,
- A time and location for interview was agreed and the interview was completed.

## Schools and Education Personnel

### Schools

- All second level schools in Galway City were written to in relation to the research (See Appendix Three),
- Each second level school was contacted by telephone,
- Three second level principals agreed to participate in the research and a teacher was recommended by a principal from a fourth school,
- One other school had agreed in principle to participate in the study but all attempts to formalise the process and arrange the interview were unsuccessful. The five other second level schools did not respond to the letter or phone call,



- Prior to each interview, the teacher or principal was informed of the content of the interview and was asked to sign a consent form,
- Each teacher or principal signed a consent form and agreed to be interviewed,
- A time and location for interview was agreed,
- Subsequently, principals and teachers recommended other teachers, ex-principals and a primary school principal to participate in the research,
- The recommended individuals were contacted,
- Prior to each interview, the recommended teachers and principals were informed of the content and each teacher or principal was asked to sign a consent form,
- Each recommended teacher or principal signed a consent form and agreed to be interviewed,
- A time and location for interview was agreed and the interview was completed.

#### Education Personnel

- Relevant services such as the Regional Office of the Department of Education and Science, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, City of Galway Vocational Education Committee, Head office of the Department of Education and Science, School Completion Programme, National Council for Special Education, and National Education Welfare Board were contacted in writing (Appendix Four),
- The following services - City of Galway VEC, Department of Education and Science, School Completion Programme, National Council for Special Education and National Education Welfare Board - responded,
- The outstanding services either did not formally respond to the formal communication (letter or phone call) or stated other services would be better positioned to contribute to the study,
- Following communication from the agencies which responded positively, contact was made with the nominated person,
- Arrangements were made to complete the interviews,
- Prior to each interview, the education personnel were informed of the content of the interview and were as asked to sign a consent form,
- Each of the education personnel signed a consent form and agreed to be interviewed,
- A time and location for interview was agreed and the interview was completed,
- Subsequently, the nominated people recommended other individuals/agencies with a particular knowledge or interest in the area of disaffection and early school leaving,

- Through the process outlined above, the recommended individuals/agencies engaged in the research process.

The process of accessing and engaging the sample group, in particular the schools and education personnel, was extremely time-consuming and challenging. The topic of 'early school leaving' appeared to be viewed with suspicion and the study was treated similarly. In general there was a very limited response to written communication. Real engagement with the study was initiated through verbal communication. While this study included the views of four out of ten schools (one other school is not involved in the delivery of the Junior or Leaving Certificate curriculum and was not asked to participate in the study), five schools did not respond to any form of communication. One other school had agreed in principle to participate in the study but all attempts to formalise the process and arrange the interview were unsuccessful.

Furthermore, there was a sense of research fatigue among schools. As mentioned previously, the process of recruiting schools to participate in the research involved verbal contact/ communication. Through these conversations and subsequent recordings in the research journal, it became apparent that within schools in Galway other research projects (unrelated to the topic being explored in this research) and extensive amounts of data collection for the Department of Education and Science were being completed. Similar to schools being viewed as a key location for the promotion of inclusion, schools are viewed as a key institution for the location of research projects. Consequently, while this study included the views of four schools it appears research fatigue contributed to the non-participation of other schools.

Table 3-1 (overleaf) provides an overview of the sample group within this study. The profile is presented in two sections; 1) Students and 2) School and Education Personnel. Furthermore, to provide a detailed description of the profile of sample group the following headings are included: Numbers within the sample group, age profile of the students, gender breakdown of the students, number of schools participating (and current status within the education system), profile of schools and education personnel and the where the sample were referred from or based in Galway City.

**Table 3-1 - Profile of Sample Group**

	Students	School and Education Personnel
<b>Number</b>	16	16
<b>Age Profile</b>	14-21	Not applicable
<b>Gender</b>	4 Females; 12 Males	Not applicable
<b>No. of Schools</b>	Students attended 5 second level schools in Galway City.	Staff from 4 second level schools. 3 schools are designated under <i>DEIS</i> .
<b>Profile</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3 Principals (Second Level),</li><li>• 3 Teachers (Second Level),</li><li>• 10 Education Personnel including: 2 ex-principals (still involved in education and development), 4 personnel specifically involved in tackling the issue of early school leaving/policy development, 3 involved in government agencies (local Vocational Education Committee, National Education Welfare Board and Special Educational Needs Organiser) and 1 Department of Education and Science official.</li></ul>
<b>Based in Galway City</b>	All students are based in Galway City. The students were referred through the following sources: Galway City Youth Advocacy Service, Youthreach, Dóchas Don Óige, and School Completion Programme - Eastside.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 11 of the interviewees were with individuals involved in education in Galway City,</li><li>• 5 of the interviewees have a national brief in relation to education.</li></ul>

Each individual participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews followed a pre-planned format with flexibility to elaborate on relevant issues, highlighted by the students during the pilot study, utilising closed and open-ended questions (see Appendix Five). The length of interviews varied between twenty and ninety minutes.

**Location of Research - Galway City**

Galway City is located on the West coast of Ireland and has a population of 72,414. Overall, the Western Region is the fourth most disadvantaged region of Ireland, but Galway City is by far the most affluent local authority area within the region, making it the fifth most affluent county in Ireland as a whole. However, the advantaged position of Galway City has declined over the past fifteen years from a deprivation score of 13.8 in 1991 to 6.6 in 2006 (GAMMA, 2008). Ireland has experienced a population growth of 20.3 per cent over the past fifteen years and Galway City’s population, by contrast, has grown by 42.4 per cent over the same period (GAMMA, 2008). Galway City has five areas designated as disadvantaged under national policy. The sample group of students within this study are drawn from these five areas and other areas of Galway City.

**Table 3-2 - Profile of Second level Schools in Galway City**

School	Address	Boys	Girls	Total
Coláiste na Coiribe	Bóthar na Thuama	150	114	264
Galway Technical Institute <sup>6</sup>	Father Griffin Road	321	560	881
Coláiste Einde	Threadneedle Road	397	175	572
Salerno Secondary School	Threadneedle Road	0	474	474
St Joseph's College	Nun's Island	757	0	757
Presentation Secondary School	Presentation Road	0	323	323
Coláiste Iognáid	Raleigh Row	320	295	615
Dominican College	Taylor's Hill	0	637	637
Meán Scoil Muire	Newtownsmith	6	317	323
St. Mary's College	St. Mary's Road	471	0	471
Community College	Wellpark	300	254	554
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2722</b>	<b>3149</b>	<b>5871</b>

(Galway City Council, 2009)

Table 3-2 shows that in 2007 there were eleven second level schools in Galway City, which served a student population of 5,871. The 2007 population comprises of 46 per cent boys and 54 per cent girls. Second level schools are predominantly located in the west of the city with a high concentration of students attending schools located within these areas (see Appendix Six).

<sup>6</sup> Galway Technical Institute does not deliver the Leaving Certificate; it primarily delivers Post-Leaving Certificate Courses.

## **Data Analysis Process**

“The process of data analysis involves making sense out of the text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data.” (Creswell, 2003, p190)

### **Step 1 – Organising and preparing the data for analysis**

Each interview was recorded and transferred from the voice recorder to computer. Each interview was given a label, e.g. Student 1 (subsequently, each student interview was given a pseudonym) or Education Personnel 1. Subsequently, each interview was transcribed and labelled as transcribed e.g. Student 1 (T). Finally, due to the style of language and dialect presented within the interviews, primarily by the students, each transcript was proofed for accuracy. Each interview was labelled as having being transcribed and proofed e.g. Student 1 (T & P).

### **Step 2 – Read through all the data and begin detailed analysis with a coding process**

“Coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data. Your codes show how you select, separate and sort data to begin an analytic accounting of them.” (Charmaz, 2006, p43)

The transcripts for this study were coded through two approaches: a) themes identified from a *priori* ideas (Saldaña, 2009) based on the research question and aims and objectives of the research and b) letting new codes emerge from the data set as the transcripts were being reviewed (Grounded Theory). In advance of outlining the coding process, an overview of Grounded Theory is provided. Grounded Theory is described as:

“Theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another. A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind ... Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data.” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p12)

Furthermore, Grounded Theory has procedures to help provide some “standardization and rigor” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p13) to the process. Significantly, “these procedures were designed not to be followed dogmatically but rather to be used creatively and flexibly by researchers as they deem appropriate” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p13). The purposes of coding, a key element of the procedure, are as follows:

- Build rather than test theory,
- Provide researchers with analytical tools for handling masses of raw materials,
- Help analysts to consider alternative means of phenomena,
- Be systematic and creative simultaneously,
- Identify, develop and relate the concepts that are building blocks of theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p13).

Operating within the context that Grounded Theory procedures “be used creatively and flexibly by researchers”, it was decided that the themes would emerge through *a priori* coding and Grounded Theory coding. While the rationale for the study is steeped within the definitive existence of early school leaving and the vocational experiences of the researcher, the theory as to why early school leaving exists in Galway City has emerged from the data. Therefore, data gathered from students, teachers, principals and other education personnel in Galway City have provided the platform for the theory to emerge. As outlined previously, this study is operating within a constructivism paradigm; Strauss and Corbin (1998) have outlined their belief that the researcher constructs theory as an outcome of their interpretation of the participants’ stories. Therefore, the use of Grounded Theory coding, as well as *a priori* coding, is relevant within this study.

### Coding Process

The need, and purpose, of coding was particularly relevant in this study due to the large amount of ‘raw material’ gathered. Furthermore, a key aspect within my current role as an Education Co-ordinator is to work with schools but not within schools; the coding process provided the opportunity to identify and develop key concepts in relation to in-school policy and practice.

A set of *a priori* codes have emerged through the research questions and aims and objectives of the research. These codes are as follows:

1. Disaffection and Early School Leaving - Evidence of disaffection and early school leaving,

2. Education Factors - Identifying factors which enhanced or inhibited the education experience for the sample group,
3. Disaffection Factors - Identifying factors which contributed to disaffection,
4. Deficit Discourse - The general discourse within the interviews relating to disaffection,
5. Policy Issues - Identifying issues which related to policy development and implementation.

The coding process was completed electronically through inserting codes through 'comments' in the text. Each transcript was read through and coded with *a priori* codes. Therefore, the codes were included on the right-hand side of each transcript. Furthermore, while reading through each transcript, any element of the data which was viewed as being 'of interest' to the research was noted through inserting a 'comment' in the text. Each transcript was then reviewed for a second time focusing on the elements identified as being 'of interest'. These elements of the data were noted and grouped together based on similarities across the transcripts. The following similarities were identified with the transcripts:

1. Tension - Tension between student and teachers/principals,
2. Blame - Mutual blame,
3. Socio-economic factors - Socio-economic factors,
4. Expectations - Teachers' expectations.

These four categories within the transcripts were developed into Grounded Theory codes: Tension, Blame, Socio-Economic Factors and Expectations. Each transcript was then recoded to include the above four codes. Therefore the transcripts were coded using the five *a priori* codes and the four Grounded Theory codes. Table 3-3 (overleaf) provides examples of the coding process as it looked within the transcripts (both *a priori* codes and grounded codes are included). The examples included in Table 3-3 are extracted from four different transcripts. Each of these examples were subsequently used within the data analysis presented in Chapter Four and Five of this study.



Table 3-3 - Coding Process within Transcripts

[Like I said already I was always telling the teacher to f..k off and that I wouldn't do this and I wouldn't do that. You know homework, I never did homework. If they gave me homework it was going straight into the fire].-----	<b>Comment [s12]:</b> Disaffection and Early School Leaving
[being late for class and then when they are pulled up on things, responding very badly and you know maybe shouting and roaring and being very disrespectful to teachers, abusive to teachers].-----	<b>Comment [s16]:</b> Disaffection and Early School Leaving
[Blaming someone whether they did it or not and they always feel very hard done by and I suppose it's changing teacher attitudes, it's changing the way subjects are taught in school, it's getting away from the points system, a major cultural thing I think needs to change in schools ... We're finding of - course the schools were blaming the families, the families would blame the schools, but when you bring everybody together there is no blame going on.].-----	<b>Comment [s21]:</b> Blame - identified as a contributory factor – emerging theme
[There's a very changed family situation and I think the extended family support isn't there. Poverty is grinding a lot of people down. The social environment is very impoverished I think in certain quarters of the city ... You know if there is insufficient economic resources they tend to miss a lot of time at school and then that all builds up into falling behind in their curriculum and they get into negative downward spirals, so that can be difficult.].-----	<b>Comment [s34]:</b> Socio-Economic Factors – identified as a contributory factor – emerging theme

Once the coding process had been completed the analysis process was initiated. Data from each transcript which had been coded (under the nine codes) were then extracted and grouped under the nine codes. Initially, the transcripts from the students and teachers/principals/policy makers were grouped together. However, in order to ensure the student voice remained strong within the research, it was decided that the data from the



students would be analysed and presented in one chapter and the data from the education personnel separately. As the data was being grouped, specific themes emerged. The themes which emerged are outlined in Table 3-4.

**Table 3-4 - Themes emerging from Data Analysis**

The Student Voice	The Voice of Education Personnel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Views on Schools</li><li>• Reasons for Early School Leaving</li><li>• Student Disaffection</li><li>• Absenteeism</li><li>• Schools and Inclusion</li><li>• Teachers and Teaching</li><li>• Deficit Discourse</li><li>• Special Educational Needs and Curriculum</li><li>• Embedded Case Study</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School Culture and System</li><li>• Inclusive and Exclusive Schools</li><li>• Deficit Discourse</li><li>• Teachers and Teaching</li><li>• Student Disaffection from Others' Perspectives</li><li>• National Policy</li><li>• Student Profile and Background</li><li>• Culpability Culture</li></ul>

**Step 3 – Analysis and Discussion**

The analysis and discussion of the themes outlined in Table 3-4 are presented in Chapters Four and Five.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues need to be considered within any research project but they are particularly relevant when young students are involved in the sample. Within this research the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2004) guidelines were adopted. According to the BERA guidelines (British Educational Research Association, 2004), educational research aims to extend knowledge and understanding in all areas of educational activity and from all perspectives including learners, educators, policy makers and the public. It was within this context that the research was conducted. Furthermore, the research operated within the context of the Child Protection Policy of Galway City Partnership and the requirements of the Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Health and Children, 1999).

The BERA guidelines are central to this research, particularly in relation to responsibilities to participants. The participants were central to this process and as outlined in previous chapters, the student voice is vitally important in this research. In line with the BERA

guidelines, the research operated within the ethics of respect for any persons involved directly or indirectly in the research they are undertaking. The research sample was recruited regardless of age, sex, race, religion, political beliefs and lifestyles or any other significant differences between such persons and the researchers themselves or other participants in the research (BERA, 2004).

Each participant in this study provided voluntary informed consent in which each participant understood and agreed to their participation without any duress, prior to the interview process beginning. Each participant had the right to withdraw from the research and was made aware of the right to withdraw.

As outlined in the BERA Guidelines (2004), in the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, the researcher fully explored all alternative ways in which each participant can be enabled to make authentic responses.

The following were key considerations:

- Confidentiality - All information is confidential and will be presented in a manner which doesn't identify the participants in the research,
- Promotion of Student Voice - Promoting the student voice rather than labelling potentially vulnerable students,
- Consent - Where students were under the age of eighteen parents' consent was received in advance of completing the interview,
- Location - All interviews with students were conducted at venues where proceedings could be viewed by another adult at all times and parents were made aware of this arrangement in advance,
- Right to Withdraw - All participants were provided with the right to withdraw (see Appendix Seven).

As outlined throughout this study the promotion of the student voice is a priority. With this in mind, all students (and parents where relevant) were informed that the research involved the promotion of the student voice rather than labelling potentially vulnerable students.

## Conclusion

Through discussing educational research, positioning within research, the student voice, research design and data analysis it is evident research can be problematic. However, research is required within education to explore practices, methodologies, approaches and effectiveness. Within this study, qualitative methods were viewed as the most appropriate framework in which the research questions could be answered. Furthermore, this study involves a process of actively interpreting and constructing knowledge within a constructivist paradigm. Therefore, the researcher is part of this research but whilst it is highly subjective, some degree of objectivity was sought throughout the research. Reflexivity has been identified as an important aspect of the research process. Throughout this research process the researcher utilised reflexivity to ensure the process remained informed and relevant. The student voice, and its benefits, has been described in detail within this chapter. The student voice provides a depth of insight and knowledge into issues which affect students within the education system and was viewed as key to this research.

The research design and the approach to analysing the data have been outlined in detail. The study includes thirty-two interviews among students, teachers, principals and education personnel. The data was coded through *a priori* codes and Grounded Theory codes. Once the coding process had been completed the data analysis process was initiated. Through the data analysis process specific themes emerged. Utilising these themes, the data is presented and analysed in Chapters Four and Five.

## **CHAPTER FOUR - THE STUDENT VOICE - AN ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Within this chapter, the voices of sixteen students<sup>7</sup> are presented, analysed and discussed. Through the coding process (outlined in Chapter Three, pgs68-72) the following themes emerged: students' views on schools, reasons for leaving school early, student disaffection, absenteeism, schools and inclusion, teachers and teaching, deficit discourse, special educational needs and curriculum. The data presented in this chapter was selected on the basis of the initial coding process and similarities and differences in the data under the specific themes. The data is presented under each of these themes. The research process ensured an extremely large amount of data was collected and while the coding process identified the themes, only a limited amount of the data could actually be presented in this document. Therefore, the data to be presented in this chapter was selected on the basis of most accurately reflecting the themes established through the coding process.

### **Views on School**

The students interviewed within this study provide an insight into how they view school, primarily second level.

#### **Figure 4-1 - Perceptions of School**

"I hated school." (John)

"Didn't enjoy it at all, I was made fun of and I wore wellingtons to school. I was always the laugh of the class." (Michael)

"I hated it ... I hated school all my life." (Kevin)

"I didn't like it that much like [sic]. It was alright, some parts of it." (Luke)

"Ya I thought it was good, but if I had [sic] to pay more attention it would have been better because it was the second year that I just realised [sic] but then I got kicked out." (Mark)

"I didn't really like it in there. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew it wasn't in there." (Brendan)

Cont'd overleaf

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<sup>7</sup> Students - For the purposes of this study all the young people have left the formal education system but they will be referred to as 'students' throughout Chapters Four, Five and Six.

“I just hated the teachers, hated the subjects, hated everything. Everything about secondary [school].” (Elaine)

“I didn’t like it. I didn’t like secondary school at all ... Too many people and I didn’t really like the system and the teachers were horrible ... I hated school. I was miserable in school.” (Ellen)

“No I hated it ... Because the teachers were too thick.” (Philip)

“I didn’t like it.” (Thomas)

With the exception of Mark and Luke, the interviews provide an insight into the students’ negative perception of school: “I hated school” (John); “I just hated the teachers, hated the subjects, hated everything. Everything about secondary [school]” (Elaine); “I hated it ... I hated school all my life” (Kevin); “I hated school. I was miserable in school” (Ellen) and “No I hated it ... Because the teachers were too thick.” (Philip). The students had extremely negative experiences of the second level education system in Galway City. Of particular concern is the forcefulness with which the students described their experiences in second level schools. The use of such terms as ‘hate’, ‘miserable’ and ‘didn’t like’ by the students in relation to their experiences is significant as it provides an insight into the ‘life of an early school leaver’ prior to actually leaving the formal education system. The experiences of the majority of the students in this sample illustrate that they did not feel included in the education system. The views of the students indicate the schools involved did not respond to their educational needs, consequently the student responded through formally excluding themselves from the school system.

The data provides a similar insight into early school leaving to the one identified by McCoy et al. (2007) and described in Chapter Two. Students experienced negativity in their school and exhibit characteristics of disaffection. The characteristics of disaffection which are particularly evident are in line with those described by Gutteridge (2002) and Steer (2000), including resistance, non-participation, aggression and negative relationship with teaching staff. Furthermore, the evidence from this research demonstrates that the students were particularly unhappy within the education system. Terms used by Michael (“Didn’t enjoy it at all” and “I was always the laugh of the class”) and Brendan (“I didn’t

really like it in there.”) are indicative of students being extremely unhappy and dejected within school. The use of such language emphasises the significant levels of humiliation and shame students were experiencing within the second level education system. Michael, in particular, illustrates the isolation and exclusion perpetuated by the education system. The Irish education system, through policy, makes references to inclusion and purports to tackle exclusion but Michael and Brendan clearly indicate that students who do not ‘fit-in’ to the norm are not retained within the system.

While Irish education policy references inclusion, all students are not fully included within schools in Galway City. Furthermore, the need for policy which delivers a school system based on inclusion and equal opportunities for all is identified. Thus, it appears the following statement within national policy reflects rhetoric rather than reality:

“Every student deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education, each person should have the opportunity to reach her/his full educational potential for personal, social and economic reasons.” (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p7)

The use of strong, emotive language by the students is particularly striking, providing an insight into the depth of feeling the students had, and still have, towards school. While the impact of disaffection from school is not specifically measured within this study, the consistency evident in the students’ responses illustrates that the students were deeply affected by their experiences in schools, particularly second level schools, in Galway City. The longer-term impact of such anger and frustration among the student sample will only emerge, over time, through disaffection from the community and society. Of particular concern is the negative view of education which these students will pass on to their children, potentially reinforcing the cycle of disaffection from the education system and extending the cycle of educational disadvantage.

Furthermore, the emotive language used must be viewed as indicative of the range of emotions experienced by the students while progressing through second level education in Galway City. The frustration, anger and humiliation clearly reflect the types of emotions experienced through interaction with an education system which failed to engage them. The emotional responses reflect a system which has failed to understand them as students, as young people or as a valued product of the family and community in which they are based. Moreover, the consistent and emotive use of ‘hate’, and similar language, by the

students illustrates that despite the fact that they have left the education system, in some cases for a significant period of time, the depth of feeling towards school remains lucid.

### **Reasons for Early School Leaving**

The study focuses on early school leaving with the students providing details of why they left the formal education system early.

**Figure 4-2 - Why we leave!**

“I was asked to leave in [School One].” (John)

“They told me I had to leave. The vice principal and another teacher [name of teacher] told me to leave the school.” (Kevin)

“I got kicked out of there ... I went down and I argued with the Head Teacher of the department or the Deputy Head, because of it and then I got kicked out of school.” (Mark)

“I got thrown out.” (Declan)

“I just got a lot of s..t from the teachers then at that time and then I was fed up and I quit.” (Thomas)

“I wouldn’t blame the school. I just didn’t want to go to school so it was my own fault.” (Ellen)

“No I left of my own free will ... I was thinking I was making a bad mistake and I know I’m going to regret it, but I pushed myself to leave it.” (Sarah)

“Got up to third year and then I got kicked out ... Because I wasn’t in school. I was very happy to tell you the truth.” (Philip)

“There’s no point.” (Paul)

The students describe why they left the formal education system using such phrases as: “I was asked to leave” (John); “They told me I had to leave” (Kevin); “I got kicked out of there” (Mark); “I got thrown out” (Declan) and “Got up to third year and then I got kicked



out” (Philip). The use of such phrases indicates these students were excluded from second level education in Galway City and that the decision to leave was imposed on them rather than leaving of their own free will. In contrast, while it must be viewed in the context of negative experiences, other students describe the decision to leave school as their own.

“There’s no point” (Paul); “I wouldn’t blame the school. I just didn’t want to go to school so it was my own fault” (Ellen) and “No, I left of my own free will” (Sarah). Specific interviews indicate the absence of a pivotal moment in which students decided to leave school early but imply a drifting away from the system and the schools they were attending. As outlined within Chapter Two, students who experience negative interaction with their teachers are more likely to leave school early. Students who are frequently ‘reprimanded’ for not doing their work or for misbehaviour are significantly more likely to leave school early, as are those who report being ignored by the teacher in class (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004). A significant issue in the analysis of early school leaving is the subgroup that is ‘not in trouble’ or ‘not high achievers’. This particular subgroup is leaving the system due to lack of attention and support from the school system. The emergence of such a subgroup can be viewed as a significant by-product of a system which facilitates a ‘targeted system of supports’ and ‘over-emphasis on academic achievement’. Further deconstruction of this issue indicates the education system is a direct reflection of a welfare state which provides support for those ‘who need it most’ and a capitalist system which rewards, through financial rewards and status, those who are successful. Nonetheless, the subgroup who ‘doesn’t rise above the parapet’ and appear to be ‘self-sustained’ is ignored, unrewarded and ultimately not worthy of mention. Policy and research have failed to engage with this subgroup. Future engagement with this subgroup will be achieved through a movement towards inclusive and universal processes in which all are treated and supported in an equal manner.

“I just got a lot of s..t from the teachers then at that time and then I was fed up and I quit” (Thomas). The data presented in this study provide evidence that students in Galway City are leaving school due to negative interaction with teachers. This study supports the view (Mittler, 2000) that teachers are hugely influential in the delivery of inclusive education. It is evident within this sample that the teachers whom the students encountered did not operate in an inclusive manner. The views provided by the students clearly indicate that the teaching methods in schools did not meet their educational needs (A specific section on Teachers and Teachings is presented on p90). On the contrary, schools are actively contributing to students leaving school early through the retention of power and control

over the engagement of students with the education system. The students are undervalued and subsequently self-esteem is reduced within a system which is, theoretically, responsible for the holistic development of the student.

Lynch (1989) outlines and describes the class division within the education system in Ireland. The level of disengagement from the system, illustrated within this study, must be viewed in a similar context. The students from disadvantaged areas of Galway City are removing themselves, or being removed, from the system due to a clash of cultures and classes. Students such as Kevin, Declan and Thomas have no 'connection to' or 'understanding of' an education system which has been developed on middle class principles. The 'lack of association with a system' creates tension and division between students and teachers/principals resulting in, as outlined above, students leaving the education system.

### **Student Disaffection**

The students provide insights into their behaviours within the education system while they remained at school.

#### **Figure 4-3 - Disaffection - A Depiction**

"Cheeky... I was asked to leave [school name]. There was [sic] a few things I was called in for but it was mainly one thing ... I just got in more trouble in secondary school." (John)

"I was getting more violent and I was getting picked on a lot. So that led me up to hitting the kids ... Like I said already I was always telling the teacher to f..k off and that I wouldn't do this and I wouldn't do that. You know homework, I never did homework. If they gave me homework it was going straight into the fire ... I was always aggressive and tell [sic] them to f..k off." (Michael)

"I was very bad, throwing things at the teachers, hitting the teachers, telling them to f..k off ... Standing up on top of the tables was one thing anyway, singing." (Michael)

"I don't know, you just get fed up with it sometimes." (Luke)

Cont'd overleaf

"I don't know I got sick of the school. I got sick of going in. I got sick of it and left ... I was arrested a few times. That was during school." (Kevin)

"I don't think the teachers like people from Westside for a long time anyway. Because there is other people that went to school there and they all got kicked out too and quit before [sic], so it was kind of habit for us." (Thomas)

"Blackguarding<sup>8</sup> with the boys and the teachers didn't like it. So, they gave me a hard time about it ... Like the worst thing I done, was on my own mate. We tied him up as a joke, and that was the worst thing I have ever done in school and I got suspended for two weeks for that ... And then I just got fed up with it and I just wouldn't go into classes." (Thomas)

"I don't think I would have been able to anyway. I just had no interest in it ... I didn't really care, like. My heart wasn't in it if you want ... Their [teachers] heart wasn't in it either." (Brendan)

"Bad, I was kind of cheeky and the teachers would kind of not bother with me by the end of it like." (Elaine)

"I don't know, the teachers was [sic] too thick with me the whole time. So I just freaked out one day, started throwing tables and chairs all over the place and that. I was suspended for two days ... Yeah I was in school every day but I just kept on dossing like. Dossing and dossing and dossing because everyone was dossing like. So I might as well go." (Philip)

"My behaviour was alright like, but they thought it was bad, it was alright ... I just wasn't able to do the work that was it, going mad because I wasn't able to do the work." (Philip)

"Reading and that, teacher asked me to read, I'd say 'I'm not able to read', I'd go mad" (Philip)

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<sup>8</sup> Blackguarding – A blackguard is viewed as a bad person or in an education context one who disrupts in a class situation. It is always pronounced as 'blaggard'.

The evidence from the students' interviews supports the belief that disaffection with school is a key indicator of early school leaving. The data highlights this through the following: "Cheeky" (John and Elaine); "No interest in it ... I didn't really care" (Brendan); "Throwing things at the teachers, hitting the teachers" (Michael); "Throwing tables and chairs all over the place" (Philip) and "I'd go mad" (Philip). As outlined earlier in the document by Holroyd and Armour (2003), disaffection is characterised by increasing levels of disruptive behaviour, truancy and exclusions, as well as falling academic standards and non-participation.

The evidence from this research coincides with the views of Holroyd and Armour (2003) and Gutteridge (2002) that disaffection exists among students. The existence of such behaviour places the teachers, other students and the student himself or herself at risk from a health and safety perspective: "Like the worst thing I done, was on my own mate. We tied him up as a joke" (Thomas). Therefore, the symptoms of such behaviour need to be addressed. As indicated by Philip, "Going mad because I wasn't able to do the work", the needs of students are not being fully met by the education system. In order to meet the needs of all students, schools should create an environment in which disaffected students are being supported and feel valued. The key to students feeling valued is the development of a positive teacher-student relationship, a culture of high expectations of, and respect for, all students and an opportunity for the 'voice of the student' to be expressed. While Michael, Philip and other students describe their extremely aggressive behaviour in school, such behaviour raises health and safety issues for teachers. Those agencies supporting teachers such as teachers' unions will be particularly critical of programmes which place teachers at risk. The Boards of Management of schools have a duty to protect staff; therefore the development of a system which potentially places teachers at risk must be treated with extreme caution.

"I was always aggressive and tell [sic] them to f..k off" (Michael) and "Throwing tables and chairs all over the place" (Philip) illustrate that a high level of anger exists among the students within the research. The interviews provided the students with an opportunity to voice their experiences of the education system, both negative and positive. The importance of the student voice is therefore highlighted, particularly as a means of providing an insight into practices operating within the Irish education system. As outlined previously, there is a need for students to be supported and valued but also a need for teachers to manage such scenarios. However, there is an underlying rationale for the conflict and tension between teachers and students. The conflict is perpetuated due to the

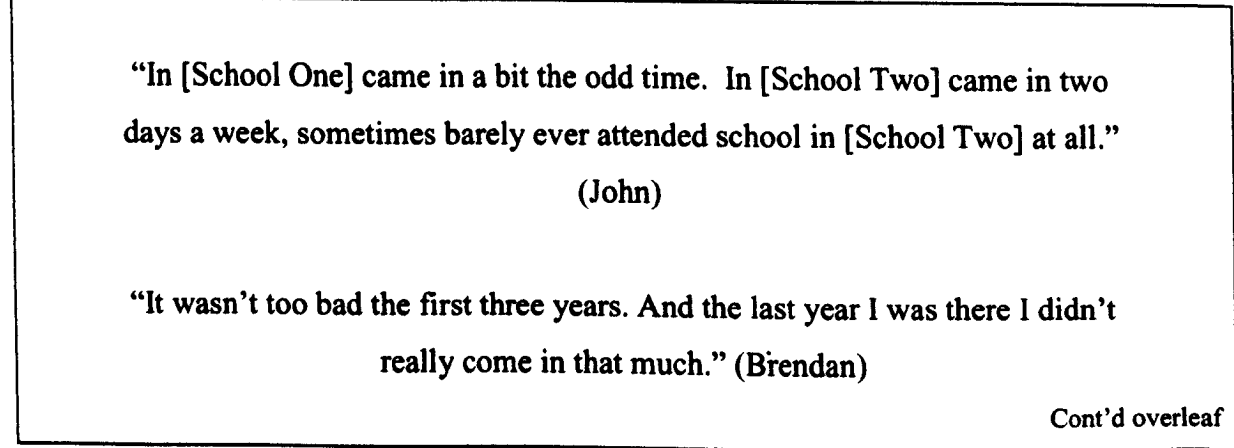
differing social classes, backgrounds and perspectives on education of the teachers and the students. Teachers clearly have ‘successfully’ progressed through the education system and have developed an appreciation for education. In contrast, students, such as those included within this study, have extremely negative perspectives of education due to their personal experience. There is a significant ‘mismatch’ and ‘mistrust’ between both parties.

Alternatively, in the context of Gilligan (1993) such challenging behaviour could be viewed is a statement of disquiet. Furthermore, within a Critical Theory framework (Horkheimer, 1995, cited in Brookfield, 2005), such behaviour could be described as disquiet towards a system which reinforces social division experienced within society. Students, while in their own community and within their own social class, are comfortable, safe, included and viewed as ‘normal’. However, on entry to an education system which is dominated by middle class ethics and perspectives, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are challenged, unsafe, vulnerable and presented with values which are different to their own. Consequently, students resist and defy through challenging behaviour. Furthermore, challenging behaviour may be a resistance to the power held by teachers over students, i.e. the power held by teachers to ‘push’ students from disadvantaged areas of Galway City towards leaving the education system early, as evidenced by the statement “I don’t think the teachers like people from Westside for a long time anyway. Because there is other people that went to school there and they all got kicked out too and quit before [sic], so it was kind of habit for us.” (Thomas).

**Absenteeism**

As highlighted in Chapter Two (Section: Complexity of Inclusion), absenteeism is another key characteristic of disaffection which students reflected upon. The interviews provide an opportunity to discuss absenteeism whilst they were still enrolled in the schools.

**Figure 4-4 - Students’ Portrayal of Absenteeism**



Cont'd

"My attendance wasn't the best." (Mark)

"I was always out of school because I used either mitch or either get thrown out for a week or two. Sometimes it could be for two or three months."

(Michael)

"I missed a good part of the year in third year and in second year it wasn't that much and in first year it was hardly any time at all." (Ellen)

"I think it was just the change of everything, everything changed when I went into fifth year, everything. So I think that kind of just made me feel like, do you know, 'I don't want to do this'. I wasn't sure then if I did want to stay on and I started taking loads of days off school and eventually I just struggled."

(Sarah)

"Didn't turn up and sometimes it would be two weeks or four weeks and I wouldn't go to school at all." (Sarah)

"Fifty [days out of school]" (Paul)

The interview process has clearly established that absenteeism is a significant issue among students who leave school early: "Sometimes barely ever attended school" (John); "I was always out of school" (Michael); "The last year I was there I didn't really come in that much" (Brendan); "I started taking loads of days off school and eventually I just struggled" (Sarah) and "Fifty [days out of school]" (Paul). In Galway City, absenteeism is clearly a symptom of disaffection and of students' impending departure from school in advance of completing the Leaving Certificate.

As outlined in Chapter Two (Steer, 2000; Harber, 2008), absenteeism is a key characteristic of disaffection from the school system. Furthermore, the research supports the findings of the School Leavers' Survey (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008) in which students, at risk of leaving school early exhibit high levels of absenteeism (Chapter Two, Section: Early School Leaving – Profile of Ireland). In addition, it illustrates absenteeism remains an issue within second level schools despite the development of the National Education Welfare Board (2000) whose role is to implement national policy aimed at

addressing absenteeism within schools. There is apathy towards school attendance among these students, an apathy which has resulted in these students leaving the education system early. As discussed previously, Sheehy et al. (2005) have identified issues in relation to the implementation of policy, suggesting “whatever the intention of the policy, the reality of its enactment can be quite different” (p75). The evidence within this research demonstrates that policies and programmes (such as the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) and the School Completion Programme) to tackle absenteeism have not impacted on the students within this sample.

Absenteeism highlights disaffection from a system which is not meeting the needs of students and is an indication of a student at risk of early school leaving. Furthermore, absenteeism must be viewed as a failure of the education system to meet the needs of students. As indicated previously in the study, absenteeism must be viewed in the context of class and cultural differences between students and those delivering education within schools. Students are excluding themselves, in advance of formal exclusion, as a means of highlighting the frustration and segregation they are experiencing within the system. Absenteeism, similar to challenging behaviour, must be viewed as a symptom of a greater issue within the education system. These issues need to be addressed through implementing student-centered teaching methods, curriculum and culture within schools. Furthermore, within the sample for this study there is evidence of both absenteeism and low self-esteem. Students are unable to participate in a system which undervalues them as individuals and nourishes self-doubt.

**Schools and Inclusion**

Using their own language and ideas the students provide an insight into the level of inclusion which exists within the school they attended. This study has provided students with the opportunity to present rich insights into the level of inclusion which exists within the school they attended using their own language, thereby emphasising the value of listening to the thoughts and voices of students.

**Figure 4-5 - Inclusion or Exclusion**

“The principal couldn’t control the school to save [his/her] life. All [the principal] did was throw out people, throw out people, throw out people, too strict as well.” (John)

Cont’d overleaf

"They wouldn't take me back ... They weren't interested or asking me if I wanted to come back." (Mark)

"You couldn't really learn back in school because a load of messers [sic] just shouting and cursing and teachers have their back turned around they would be [sic] throwing papers and pens." (Kevin)

"Yeah she [teacher] would go into the other class for an hour or two and leave me in the class by myself ... I never fitted in to school, no. I was always messing dancing on tables and singing. Sometimes I was a bit rowdy with the other kids. Sometimes I could be the nicest kid there. I was always picked on, so that made me aggressive." (Michael)

"That was partly how teachers just judged me straight away ... That's all that I want. It's different being like the Travelling boy, do you know, going to school at that age but 17... I don't know. It's the shame going to school with a big school bag." (David)

"They [teachers] always pick on you compared to the rest of them, know what I mean ... Like people would look at us and say like they're the scumbags and all that. That's the way they see us." (Thomas)

"There was 1b1, 1b2, 1b3. I was in 1b1 like, 1b2 was the second kinda class. The fellas in 1b3 and sometimes 1b4 they'd only have maybe two classes in the whole day, one at the beginning and one at the end. And you just see them all they'd have to do just play soccer." (Brendan)

"Isolated and lonely. I felt like I was starting off again and it was just completely different from first year to third year, the way the teachers got on with you again like, it was just, it was like when I went into fifth year. Forget about your Junior Cert. It wasn't important, who cares about it and before this it was study, study, study, it's so important and I didn't like that. I wasn't comfortable with it." (Sarah)



Cont'd

“I don’t know, it just made me feel normal. Just being a bit of a scumbag because they think we are scumbags.” (Philip)

“I came back again and the vice principal told me that she wanted to put me in another school ... Well that’s what they told me; but no I could have went back in and I could have done well in that class.” (Mary)

“All [the principal] did was throw out people, throw out people, throw out people” (John); “Yeah she [teacher] would go into the other class for an hour or two and leave me in the class by myself ... I never fitted in to school” (Michael); “They wouldn’t take me back ... They weren’t interested or asking me if I wanted to come back” (Mark) and “They think we are scumbags” (Philip). The data presented provide an insight into the levels of inclusion, or exclusion, experienced by the sample group while participating in second level education. The data reveals how the reality of policy implementation runs contrary to the expressed intent and values of inclusive education: “The vice principal told me that she wanted to put me in another school” (Mary). The evidence is in marked contrast to the view of inclusive education described in Chapter Two as the participation of all students and the removal of all forms of exclusionary practice. Furthermore, the view that “inclusion is a question of rights and concerns a philosophy of acceptance and a framework within which individuals can be valued, respected and enabled to learn” (Wearmouth and Glynn, 2004, p7) is not evident among the students interviewed within this research.

The student voice illustrates that these students did not feel included within the second level school system. As a result, the evidence casts doubt on the level of inclusion and inclusive policies which exist within the schools these students attended. The focus of current policy is on educational disadvantage without full acknowledgement of the need for an inclusive education system. The evidence from this research draws attention to the existence of negative language, isolation, low expectations and school culture issues within second level schools. The data collected also suggest that schools are not inclusive and the student voice highlights the needs for inclusive practice and policies within schools.

As indicated by Thomas, “They [teachers] always pick on you compared to the rest of them, know what I mean ... Like people would look at us and say like they’re the scumbags and all that. That’s the way they see us.” Specific teachers have low expectations

of the students interviewed, reiterating the view taken by Archer and Shortt (2003) that some teachers take pupils' social background into account when assessing their ability. Certainly, Thomas experienced such an assessment. The level of expectation can be driven by the schools' views of cultural issues, curriculum and teacher training but also by the norms and values of the teachers themselves. For that reason, there is a mismatch between the expectations of teachers and the expectations of the students they are teaching. As described by Sheehy et al. (2005) inclusive education is about being treated equally, with respect and providing real learning opportunities. The evidence, as supported by Thomas, portrays a system which creates and encourages exclusion, disaffection and labelling of students based on how they view the student and the students' background.

“That was partly how teachers just judged me straight away ... That's all that I want. It's different being like the Travelling boy, do you know, going to school at that age but 17... I don't know. It's the shame going to school with a big school bag.”, David's quote encapsulates a significant barrier to remaining within the education system. The stigma David describes emerges from a system which judges and fails to engage with diversity. The failure to recognise and respect diversity results in students like David experiencing shame and demeaning his self-esteem. Education, as outlined in Chapter Two, is viewed as a mechanism for individual empowerment and the promotion of human rights. However, there is evidence within this study that school can act as a mechanism for oppression and segregation. The development of a more tolerant and respectful society is restricted within a context of intolerance towards diversity and difference which is reflected in schools.

Segregation is further reflected through Brendan's insights: “there was 1b1, 1b2, 1b3. I was in 1b1 like, 1b2 was the second kinda class. The fellas in 1b3 and sometimes 1b4 they'd only have maybe two classes in the whole day, one at the beginning and one at the end.”. Such segregation indicates that in a school where streaming exists, lower streamed classes will be treated differently to those in higher streams. Thus, specific students are not experiencing the type of inclusive education system as detailed by Sheehy et al. (2005). Furthermore, streaming is, as suggested in Chapter Two, deliberately creating class divisions within schools, replicating and reinforcing the divisions within society. An attempt to promote inclusive education within Galway City, or nationally, requires a movement away from the use of streaming within second level education.

The data collected implies a deficit in classroom management skills among certain teachers. The behaviour of students, particularly those disaffected from the system, can be challenging for teachers. Consequently practical classroom management skills are imperative. As described within the School Leavers' Survey (Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2008), while school leaving remains at a relatively consistent level, students are being retained to a greater extent within the Junior Cycle. Therefore, teachers will potentially be working with larger numbers of students who may be at risk of disaffection from the system and the need for classroom management skills will be further emphasised. These skills will allow teachers to increase empathy towards students, create relationships with students, understand their personal and social needs and create an environment of support within the classroom.

Sarah outlines being “isolated and lonely” on her return to school after completing the Junior Certificate. She expanded on this, stating: “I felt like I was starting off again and it was just completely different from first year to third year, the way the teachers got on with you again like, it was just, it was like when I went into fifth year. Forget about your Junior Cert. It wasn't important, who cares about it and before this it was study, study, study, it's so important and I didn't like that”. In this case, it is the curriculum and structure of the education system which has created difficulties for Sarah. The emphasis, or over-emphasis, on the Leaving Certificate has pushed Sarah towards leaving school prior to completing the Leaving Certificate.

**Teachers and Teaching**

As part of the interviews, students provided insights into teachers that worked with them while they were in school. The following data provide an overview of the views the students had on the relationships, expectations, teaching methodologies and approaches utilised by the teachers.

**Figure 4-6 - Teachers - Divided Opinion**

“There was a few teachers, like one of them would be the soundest teacher. Like he would sit down and talk to me about pretty much anything.” (John)

“I don't know. They just give you a hard time.” (Thomas)

Cont'd overleaf

“Teachers, I suppose. Like in primary, like the teachers wouldn’t give out to you they would help you out and s..t like that. But another thing, it was like they were picking, certain people out, know what I mean. And not helping them and s..t like that. And most didn’t like it, like most, most of us dropped out before third year, fourth year no one actually, I don’t think anyone of us went down and finished school.” (Thomas)

“School, right across from my own class, there was a teacher there [teacher name] ... She used turn her ring over like that [he illustrates] her engagement ring and she used to hit us on the hand with it.” (Michael)

“She could have, ‘cause the way she was doing it like there was boys in the class that was getting A’s and the whole time and she was just explaining it away for them and getting it done. Not explaining to the people who couldn’t get to their level and couldn’t understand.” (Mark)

“I’d say, I think there were a class of, I don’t know I think it was 20 or something like that, could be less and I’d say 4 to 5 of them in the class was the A’s and B’s students and the rest wasn’t getting so much help.” (Mark)

“No he was sound. He’d always like give me a chance in there and he’d explain things for me to understand. It wasn’t just like put it up on the board and just now do that. It wasn’t like that it was, he was more involved in the class. He was like explaining things to them.” (Mark)

“Fighting and cursing at the teacher. I threw a stool at him one day because I don’t know. He just came down. I came in, in the morning and I was half asleep and he had a big page of sums done out for me. I said I’d do it in a minute, a minute went anyway and I was about to do them he started roaring and shouting. He came down and started shaking me like that (he illustrates) ... do your work now. I picked up the chair and flung it at him.” (Luke)

"Some of them didn't like me ... They usually just said what had to be done really and then the kind of smarter fellas up the front would usually know a lot." (Brendan)

"Ah no that's just, you don't like teachers. Teachers are telling you what to do. I just didn't like it in secondary school. I really liked Irish. I still like Irish and I was really interested in history. If I was more interested in [sic] would be more motivated to actually do it. I just wasn't interested enough I just completely had lost interest in school and my parents couldn't make me go."  
(Ellen)

"All the teachers taught differently but I thought they could have been a lot more like one on one teaching rather than the whole class and I think I kind of need that as well." (Ellen)

"I gave him the essay and he was not happy with the essay. He said it was complete rubbish, but not in them [sic] words and he said I had to come back to him. Then the following day that he knew I was capable of and then when he'd be talking to you like that you'd be thinking maybe I can do better than what I'm doing. And it was good that he wasn't accepting any kind of rubbish we were willing to give him like." (Mary)

"Brilliant, I have to say I never have any complaint about the teachers there. They were so nice and I got on with them." (Sarah)

"In third year I had a better teacher and I was passing just about. This new teacher for the first two years I despised the teacher I had and she had no time for me either." (Elaine)

"Ya I had a brilliant teacher and he looked for ya. If you were missing from class, I know at the time it used to drive me mad 'cause he'd caught me mitching but he'd always look, he'd notice you were gone, even if you didn't have him that day." (Elaine)

Cont'd

“Bad [Behaviour], I was kind of cheeky and the teachers would kind of not bother with me by the end of it like. If they asked me for homework I'd be like I haven't got it. The next day they wouldn't even ask me if I had the homework. They were just getting to the point where they were just skipping me out like. They just knew I didn't have it.” (Elaine)

“Pure strict, do you know what I mean, just annoying and they would go through your brain and you think you are going to hit them a thump ... They didn't teach me nothing ... I went in smart and came out as thick as the wall.”  
(Philip)

As discussed in Chapter Two, behaviours and attitudes associated with disaffection are very much dependent on the school, its culture, management and ethos, together with factors associated with the individual teachers in the school (Gutteridge, 2002). “They didn't teach me nothing ... I went in smart and came out as thick as the wall” (Philip), the evidence presented in this study identifies issues in relation to teachers and their relationship with students. The data provide an insight into the extremely negative relationships between students and some teachers, in which the teachers did not engage with the student, “Not explaining to the people who couldn't get to their level and couldn't understand” (Mark). Moreover, Luke's reaction to this type of negative relationship is to respond with the extremely aggressive behaviour of throwing a chair at the teacher, “Fighting and cursing at the teacher ... I picked up the chair and flung it at him”. This type of behaviour within a classroom has emerged from the mismatch between the norms/values of the teacher and those of the student, and again raises the issue of teacher safety. As suggested by NASUWT (2008), the inclusion of all students can place teachers in extremely difficult situations, situations which can compromise teacher safety and as such inclusion within schools is very much a contested area on the grounds of health and safety. Inclusion of all students will present different and difficult challenges for teachers and school management including: management of increased numbers remaining within the school, creation of inclusive policies within the school, development of differentiated teaching methods and the availability of a flexible curriculum to meet the needs of all students.

The behaviour outlined by Elaine, “Bad [Behaviour], I was kind of cheeky” and by John and Michael, in the Student Disaffection Section of this Chapter (p80), can be viewed as an attempt by students to gain the attention of a teacher, or teachers, from whom they would otherwise not receive attention. While the behaviour of the students is inappropriate, the underlying context is of students who are seeking to form a relationship with their teachers. In the absence of a positive relationship a negative relationship is preferable to none (Webster Stratton, 2004).

“One of them would be the soundest teacher” (John); “No he was sound. He’d always like give me a chance in there and he’d explain things for me to understand” (Mark); “Ya I had a brilliant teacher” (Elaine); and “Brilliant ... They were so nice and I got on with them” (Sarah). As can be seen from these quotes some students had extremely positive relationships with teachers. Positive relationships are based on the ability of teachers to be supportive and listen to the students. Mary’s interview draws attention to the positive effect teachers can have with a student-centred approach and a framework in which the student can progress. As highlighted by Mary, “It was good he wasn’t accepting any kind of rubbish we were willing to give him”; she appreciated when the teacher pushed her to do better and did so in an encouraging manner. The differing levels of confidence and personalities among students introduces the importance of working with a student to develop a relationship which allows a teacher to gain a profile of each student and to develop the most appropriate teaching style to meet the needs of students. Positive relationships will allow a teacher to challenge a student, without fear of reprisal, to progress, develop and learn.

A point worth noting is that a number of the student sample attended the same second level schools. Within these schools, different students had both positive and negative relationships with teachers. Therefore, the evidence is suggesting the approach and expectations of individual teachers may be different to the culture of the school. The evidence implies, as supported by Mittler (2000), the importance of teachers in the progression of inclusive education. With this in mind, the need for teachers to acquire skills and positive approaches within teacher training colleges is imperative. However, of greater importance is the need for teachers, and teaching colleges, to acquire an appreciation of the need to create expectations and develop motivation among students based on the student’s needs, rather than on the needs, perspectives and background of the teachers. Furthermore, the creation of positive expectations for the students must be

underpinned by positive leadership among management and staff. In the absence of leadership the development of an inclusive culture within the school will be restricted.

The importance of the impact teachers have on students is evident throughout the research, especially in the comments of Brendan, Luke and Mark. Each student interviewed was in a position to vividly describe situations, both positive and negative, involving teachers. The evidence implies that teachers have a powerful influence on students' participation and retention within the education system. As discussed previously, teachers need to acquire the skills to form positive relationships with students, relationships which will support the student through the education system. Consequently, there is a responsibility on teachers to value students and progression through the system should be based primarily on the students' educational needs. Furthermore, teaching methods should be student-centred and differentiated to cater for a variety of learning styles, otherwise powerful and negative influence is being fostered by the education system. Challenging such an education system to move from the above perspective to the development of a more inclusive agenda will require time, vision and flexibility.

**Deficit Discourse**

During the interviews, the deficit language used by students provided an insight into their negative experiences at school.

**Figure 4-7 - Deficit Discourse Perpetuated**

“I was always slow so I ended up messing all the time ... I wasn’t great anyway.” (John)

“Like I said I was slow, no other school would take me.” (Michael)

“They used to do aggressive tests and they used to do, see I am slow ... I don’t know how to read or write like.” (Michael)

“I feel [sic] stupid. She’d make like a show. Embarrass me in front of class if I asked for help or anything, or something like that.” (Mark)

“I just looked stupid. It was like a special needs class.” (Declan)

Cont’d overleaf



"I was just sitting in there like a fool. I wasn't doing anything. It wouldn't be up to the lads like in secondary school. It wouldn't be up to their standards ... I'm not the greatest reader or writer, but I'm far from stupid. You know what I mean." (David)

"No. I wouldn't have been able to ... I was probably one of the dumber fellas in that class." (Brendan)

"I was a bit behind anyways but I just kinda of lost interest and stopped school and got even more way behind." (Ellen)

"I was always slow" (John); "I just looked stupid" (Declan); "I was just sitting in there like a fool" (David) and "I was probably one of the dumber fellas in that class" (Brendan). The views presented in this section provide evidence of the use of deficit language, which students associate with their experience of learning and education. The students used terms such as 'slow', 'stupid' and 'fool', terms associated with a deficit or medical model of thinking. The evidence implies students have been exposed to such language within schools settings. The use of this type of language can deeply impact on students, particularly those students at risk of early school leaving. As outlined within the Section: Teachers and Teaching of this Chapter, the students are still in a position to recall quite clearly how they felt and the language used towards them while in school, "I feel [sic] stupid. She'd make like a show. Embarrass me in front of class" (Mark). This is in spite of the fact that it had been a significant period of time since these students attended school. The data is clearly contrary to "a form of words that avoids labelling children and that instead emphasises the challenge to the system" (Mittler, 2000, p9).

John, Brendan, Michael and Declan perpetuate the myth that the students are solely at fault for their failure within education. Their language reflects self-blame and poor self-image following their involvement with the education system. Therefore, the education system has failed these students through supporting institutions which allow students to think they are 'stupid' or 'slow'. Within a second level system which has a particular focus on academic achievement, students will differ, but diversity should have a place within education (Carrington and Elkins, 2005). Students should feel valued and appreciated. However, currently students like John, Brendan, Michael and Declan are emerging from a

system where they are led to believe they are at 'fault', 'not worthy to participate' and ultimately 'unwelcome'.

### **Special Educational Needs and Curriculum**

Within the interviews references were made to the curriculum and in particular cases to special educational needs.

#### **Figure 4-8 - Special Educational Needs, Curriculum and Frustration**

"Maths, English there is no really interesting subjects." (John)

"When I was inside in school, they used to get me Tara and Ben books ... That's what I was on for years. Put it this way I should be still on them at the moment. I went from Tara and Ben up to Ben and Anne. To me it was the same crap over and over, if it was learning me so what." (Michael)

"No one helped me with English in primary school, only my mother when I would come home." (Kevin)

"I never got help with English though. I got sent onto the computer for English. Down the end of class on the computer, me and another fella."  
(Kevin)

"I had to go to him every day for a half an hour ... The reading teacher was there to help me most of the time ... I am getting better at writing as well because I used do my ds and bs backwards." (Luke)

"Metalwork and maths is alright because you don't have to do that much, and art." (Luke)

"I like woodwork and technical drawing and metalwork, PE." (Mary)

"Even today now to sit in front of a long division sum now I couldn't. I'm absolutely hopeless." (Mary)

Cont'd overleaf

"I think a lot of the classes just seemed dull and boring so if they made it more interesting but I couldn't grasp the business studies 'cause I was no good with numbers anyway so I was always put out of the class into another class. They just couldn't be bothered with ya. You know, if you couldn't get it they weren't bothered. But then there were other teachers that were." (Mary)

"So that's why I prefer to be told and explained [to], instead of reading it cause some things I just don't understand ... They should understand that everybody is not all the same. That they're not A students or whatever, they're not all the same so they should take time for us and the other students that can't do it as good." (Mark)

"Extra help, like a fella would come around to the class and pick certain people out and bring them out and then he would help them out with whatever help you needed. Like you would be able to talk to him and he would tell you all this s..t." (Thomas)

Students indicate preferences for specific subjects. Woodwork, technical drawing, metalwork and other vocational type subjects are identified as the preferred subject choice for male students. While other subjects were identified as not being of interest, the research data provide evidence that the students do not have strong opinions on the curriculum and do not link it to their decision to leave school early. Concerns with subjects and the curriculum appear to reflect greater issues with the schools rather than being the central issue with the process of disaffection.

While the interview process did not make specific reference to special educational needs, a certain number of students within the sample group identified themselves as such. As outlined within Chapter Two, there are links between special educational needs and early school leaving; this is supported by the research data. Furthermore, there are indications within the research that students were withdrawn for extra support, suggesting the existence of a system in which the needs of students are not fully catered for by the mainstream teacher. "When I was inside in school, they used to get me Tara and Ben books ... That's what I was on for years. Put it this way I should be still on them at the

moment. I went from Tara and Ben up to Ben and Anne. To me it was the same crap over and over.”, Michael’s interview illustrates his individual education needs were not being developed or progressed; rather they are being labelled and isolated within the mainstream education system. Mark’s interview emphasises the need for differentiated teaching methods within schools to meet the education needs of all students.

There is also evidence, however, that students with specific education needs are not supported within schools. Kevin describes how he was “sent on the computer for English” suggesting that his education needs were not being met while in school. The exclusion of Kevin from the mainstream education system resulted in isolation, labelling and lack of support. The need for differentiated approaches to meet the needs of students is imperative. Through the use of a differentiated approach, the educational needs of students can be identified and supported. As outlined previously, within an inclusive education perspective, students need to be treated equally and valued. The research reveals specific students are not being treated equally within the Irish education system and are, in effect, being excluded.

Embedded Case Study - Dean

As outlined in Chapter Three an embedded case study has been included as a means of strengthening and adding to the presentation of the student voice. The following embedded case study illustrates the type of process a student moves through when disengaging with the school system and formally leaving the education system early.

**Figure 4-9 – Embedded Case Study - Dean**

Dean is 18 years old and lives in an area designated as disadvantaged within Galway City. He attended a second level school designated as disadvantaged and left school prior to completing the Leaving Certificate. During his interview Dean described his varying experiences within the education system. On recalling his time in primary level education Dean stated that “Yeah it was good I liked it ... ‘cause everyone there was sound like and it was good ... the teachers were alright.” In relation to his second level education Dean stated that “the only thing I really liked about school was socialising with my friends like”. The school Dean attended utilised a streaming system in which an entrance exam dictated the class each student entered along with the profile of that particular class.

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The school Dean attended utilised a streaming system in which an entrance exam dictated the class each student entered along with the profile of that particular class. When describing the system Dean noted that "A is the smartest one, I was in that one right up until 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 3A". Dean highlighted his peer group's experience of second level education: "I assume some of them might have failed their Junior Cert.<sup>9</sup> Like I know a couple of them failed in the 3C there was only 6 in 3C because they were not that smart."

In relation to the lower stream within the school Dean noted that "the lads in 3C, most of them dropped out like". In contrast Dean was in the top stream of his year and within this system Dean completed the junior cycle and continued on to the senior cycle. While Dean continued into the senior cycle his peer group did not progress: "I'd say some of them dropped out and some [of] them did the Leaving Cert. Applied<sup>10</sup>". On progressing to the senior cycle, Dean "went into the smart class in Leaving Cert. but everyone in there was, you know, the lads didn't talk to me, none of my friends". However, while in the top stream of the senior cycle Dean made a significant decision:

"My Junior Cert. was ok but when I went into doing the Leaving Cert. I went into the ordinary Leaving Cert. room and said 'f.k it'. I couldn't really do that. Well I probably could have done it but there wasn't anyone in there that I knew. So I did Leaving Cert. Applied. From there it went downhill and my attendance was s..t like."

Throughout the interview Dean spoke in detail about his experience of teachers while in second level education, particularly focusing on his relationship with teachers. He believed "The teaching wasn't great there". More specifically Dean felt that "the first impression they got of me they didn't like me and it went from there".

Cont'd overleaf

<sup>9</sup> Junior Cert. - The Junior Certificate Examination is held at the end of the Junior Cycle in post-primary schools. The Junior Cycle caters for students in the 13-15 year old age group. Students normally sit for the examinations at the age of 14 or 15, after 3 years of post-primary education.

<sup>10</sup> Leaving Cert. Applied - The Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year Leaving Certificate, available to students who wish to follow a practical programme with a strong vocational emphasis.

Cont'd

Dean also spoke about the interest levels among the teachers within the second level school he attended: "They could have and I could have shown a little bit more [interest] too but you are not going to show interest to a teacher who is not really teaching you". Similarly, "Teacher's in there and you're asking questions and just told to take your hand down and shut up or do your work or something". Dean outlines the frustration he felt while within the second level education system:

"You're there for like for a reason, to learn, they should help you like ... That's why half the time you're thrown out of class, but I'm not like [sic] if someone doesn't show me respect then I'm not gonna be respectful to them."

Furthermore, Dean perceives that different approaches existed within different schools in Galway City:

"They do teach you but not the way some schools I'd say do like. If when you hear about say like [school name] or [school name] a lot of people are doing well in there ... [Dean's school] Just look at the stats or whatever like half of them don't even do their Leaving Cert."

On further expansion of this point Dean alleges that the school he attended "really used to focus on a few people each time, you know, and there was too many in the class and well, from my experience in [sic] anyway I suppose you know the smart people are going to get smarter and leave the rest behind." Within this context Dean outlines his attendance record in school: "I barely ever came in" and "The first few months I was doing ok and I then just sometimes didn't bother coming in". Dean describes his experience while in school: "I got thrown out of class loads". Dean outlines when he and his peer group were in class we just "got up and pulled back the chairs" and didn't participate in the class. Dean's relationship with the principal of the school also deteriorated as he progressed within the system:

"The principal hated me ... I was doing very good like but they don't really encourage. They only really encourage the people like, you know, the people who are getting the A's all the time."

Cont'd overleaf

Dean describes the sequence of events which ultimately led to him being excluded from the second level school:

“Yeah but I got thrown out like ... We went to [destination of school trip] and you know, you are not allowed to drink. You are not allowed to do this or whatever and all this you know whatever and this got us drinking, but they just made it way too strict and everything and in the end we just started arguing with the teachers ... The principal told me that no-one wants me in the class so I just never went back.”

Dean also outlines the response he received on attempting to return to the school:

“No, I came back by myself, yeah because you know, I was in Leaving Cert. Applied and it was my last year and I could have passed it like but the dean [principal] just told me that no-one [sic] none of the teachers wanted me in class so I counted that as being expelled like.”

Dean did not return to the second level school system in Galway City.

Dean's case study maps the journey of an early school leaver from participation in the education system to disengaging from the same system. The embedded case study not only provides an example of how a student leaves the school system but also re-iterates the view that the programmes (such as the School Completion Programme) and policies (such as the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000) operating to tackle early school leaving within the education system are not meeting the needs of all students. Dean provides an insight into the issues which exist between students and teachers; Dean outlines that “the teaching wasn't great there”. The relationship with other staff members, such as the principal, is a contributing factor to Dean leaving school early. Policy developed to address the issue of early school leaving needs to work with and effect change among all staff working with students who are at risk of disaffection from the education system.

Dean provides examples of the characteristics of disaffection: he was regularly absent from school, his behaviour was aggressive/inappropriate and over time there was a general lack of interest in education. The particularly significant issue within this embedded case study

is that the student enjoyed primary school and initially progressed well within second level education. However, as the student progressed through the system this positive experience deteriorated. Furthermore, there is evidence that the use of deficit language among school staff negatively impacted on the student's experience within second level education. With an inclusive approach to education, the need for a change of attitude within second level education is identified. School staff need to develop positive relationships with all students, particularly those at risk of disaffection. The skills required for developing positive relationships with students must be explored within teacher training colleges and schools. Chapter Five (Section: Teachers and Teaching) discusses evidence from teachers and education personnel in relation to the need for greater training for teachers in the area of inclusive education and more specifically the need to develop teaching methods which will allow teachers to support all students through the education system.

The School Completion Programme was, and continues to be, in operation within the second level school identified within the embedded case study. At no stage during the embedded case study did the student make direct reference to the supports provided by the School Completion Programme. This confirms that the School Completion Programme operates on the periphery of a school without impacting on the experience of specific students in school. Furthermore, the intention of the programme is to directly work with those students who are at risk of leaving school early; however, the reality is that the programme has not worked effectively with students and subsequently students are leaving school prior to completing second level education. Therefore, the intention-reality gap identified by Sheehy et al. (2005) is evident within the School Completion Programme. Policy and specific programmes are being developed at governmental level, but the programme is implemented within schools by people 'on the ground'. Consequently, significant differences exist between the stated intention of a policy, as believed by policy-makers, and the impact, whether positive or negative, that policies are having in reality.

Dean places blame on the school management and the teachers for many of the issues he experienced while in the school. There is limited reflection on the part of the student as to the amount he contributed to the 'difficulties' with the staff; more significantly it illustrates the 'culpability culture' in which students place blame on the school for issues in relation to second level education. Consequently, in order for early school leaving to be addressed there is a need for all those involved to take responsibility for and ownership of the issue. Taking 'ownership' of the issue will provide an opportunity to take control of the



difficulties and to plan actions to effect real change in relation to the issue of early school leaving.

While policies such as the School Completion Programme are being implemented, the actual internal policies and approaches of schools remain exclusionary. The low expectations of teachers and the use of deficit discourse referenced within the embedded case study are far removed from ensuring the needs of all students are being met within the education system. The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) has developed an 'Index for Inclusion'. The key concepts of the Index are 'inclusion', 'barriers to learning and participation', 'resources to support learning and participation' and 'support for diversity'. Taking the 'Index for Inclusion' as a benchmark for inclusion within schools, this research provides evidence that certain schools in the Irish education system are not meeting the requirements in relation to inclusive education. As outlined in this research, specific barriers to learning have been identified, including low teacher expectations, lack of supports for students at risk of disaffection and lack of support for diversity within a school setting.

### Conclusion

The student voice provides an informed insight into the experiences of students who left the education system early. The reasons identified by the students for leaving school early include negative relationships with teachers, lack of interest, lack of support and exclusion. However, the reasons for disengagement from the system must be viewed in the context of an education system which is failing to meet the educational and social needs of all students. The students involved in the study have emerged from second level schools frustrated, angry and disillusioned with the system. The students recollect examples of disaffection, absenteeism and challenging behaviour while involved in second level education. Further analysis indicates a culture clash exists between the perspective of the student and that of teachers and principals involved in delivering education. Such a clash creates a tension which impacts on the students' participation within the education system. Furthermore, the embedded case study and the evidence of the other students illustrate the limited impact current policy has had in relation to addressing early school leaving. Chapter Five presents and analyses the voice of schools and education personnel.

## **CHAPTER FIVE - THE VOICE OF SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION PERSONNEL - AN ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Within this chapter, the views of sixteen individuals involved in schools or the education system are presented, analysed and discussed. Through the coding process (outlined in Chapter Three, pgs68-72) the following themes emerged: school culture and systems, inclusion within schools, deficit discourse, teachers and teaching, student disaffection, national policy, student profiling and backgrounds. Furthermore, the issue of a 'culpability culture' within the education system will be introduced. The data presented in this Chapter was selected on the basis of the initial coding process and similarities and differences in the data under the specific themes. The data is presented under each of these themes. The research process ensured an extremely large amount of data was collected and while the coding process identified the themes, only a limited amount of the data could actually be presented in this document. Therefore, the data to be presented in this Chapter was selected on the basis of most accurately reflecting the themes established through the coding process.

### **School Culture and Systems**

Teachers and principals outline the approaches of their school to education and to their students.

#### **Figure 5-10 - School Responses to Diversity and Students Needs**

"Every student that comes into the school is the responsibility of the principal to see that they are getting an education, and a correct education, and that would I suppose be on a day to day basis. That is what we are dealing with and in fact we have to step back to that, every day you become distracted from the child's experience of education ... So it's every child and how they are coping and, how, what we can do for the specific child to reach their maximum potential ... It has to be a child-centred, focused experience." (Principal 1)

"Our students are very diverse, so to look after those and to look after the staff and to develop the staff so that they can meet the needs of the students, to involve the parents ... I like to feel that that's their family and I like the staff to feel the same way and that we we [sic] work out of concern for each other and maybe a kind of a loving community in the old sense or even in the sense of it's a community, in the fuller sense in that we give each other our best."

(Principal 2)

Cont'd overleaf

“They can go to a school which can allow, try and maximise the potential of the child and at the same time, integrate them ... Teaching and learning should be at the core of every school.” (Principal 3)

“[The system is] concentrating on 25% of the cream, driven by the cream themselves.” (Principal 1)

“Philosophy [of the Department of Education and Science] in relation to education in Ireland is to provide training for the mind, body and soul, so that we’re producing, whole, fully rounded, competent, fully capable people that can go out and present themselves and be proud of themselves.” (Department of Education and Science Official<sup>11</sup>)

“I think what we’ve done is create a monster called the Leaving Cert. Parents think it’s the Holy Grail ... Their kids will get the points and get into college; they think they’ve arrived.” (Principal 3)

“I think every school is trying to be everything to everybody ends up with piecemeal and the kids that really need the support aren’t getting the full proper support, because it’s bits and pieces. I would be more inclined to say that schools should specialise in different areas, and have units within the school, so they can be in mainstream at certain times and be actually specialised learning.” (Principal 3)

“Well, you’re giving the parents the impression that if they send them to a mainstream school, that all these supports are going to be there and wonderful things are going to be happening, and that’s not reality. That’s pie in the sky.” (Principal 3)

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<sup>11</sup> The Department of Education and Science Official is a Principal Officer within the Department of Education and Science. The position involves policy development and implementation, with a specific brief in relation to DEIS.

The descriptions from the interviews with the principals outline the type of school/education they are attempting to deliver: "It has to be a child-centred, focused experience" (Principal 1); "To develop the staff so that they can meet the needs of the students, to involve the parents ... a kind of a loving community in the old sense or even in the sense of it's a community" (Principal 2) and "They can go to a school which can allow, try and maximise the potential of the child and at the same time, integrate them ... Teaching and learning should be at the core of every school" (Principal 3). These views of education initially seem to reflect the views of the Department of Education and Science Official as providing "Training for the mind, body and soul, so that we're producing, whole, fully rounded, competent, fully capable people that can go out and present themselves and be proud of themselves".

However, there are contrasting views among the principals in relation to the culture and functions of schools. Despite principals focusing on different aspects of second level education, there is a sense of frustration among principals in relation to the current structure and focus of education. The principals portray a system which is fragmented and focused on academic achievement: "I think every school is trying to be everything to everybody ends up with piecemeal and the kids that really need the support aren't getting the full proper support, because it's bits and pieces" (Principal 3). Tension is evident in relation to the over-emphasis on the Leaving Certificate, "What we've done is create a monster called the Leaving Cert. which is referred to as a 'Monster'" (Principal 3). There are clear contradictions between the rhetoric of the Department of Education and Science and the reality of schools involved in delivery of education. Such contradictions are reflected in this study with the emergence of students from the education system with low levels of confidence and self-worth rather than the profile suggested by the Department of Education and Science of "whole, fully rounded, competent, fully capable people".

Furthermore, there is a level of uncertainty as to the role of the school within the education system. The Department of Education and Science views education/schools as a mechanism for the production of 'fully rounded' students, whereas the view held by schools and parents, as suggested by the principals, is that schools are mechanisms for accessing third level education "Their kids will get the points and get into college" (Principal 3). There are underlying tensions within the education system, tension between those involved in developing policy and those involved in delivering education 'on the ground' with the system which is "concentrating on 25% of the cream, driven by the cream themselves" (Principal 1). Moreover, the tension appears to emerge through the

hierarchical nature of the education system. The impact of such tension was reflected in Chapter Four, in which a ‘divided’ education system is incapable of meeting the needs of all students, a ‘divided’ system which is contributing to the issue of early school leaving.

The structure and approach of a school is linked to the method of allocating students to classes. As noted within Chapter Two, allocation of students within classes is linked to disaffection. The policy in relation to streaming among second level schools in Galway City was discussed during the interviews with principals and teachers.

**Figure 5-11 - Streaming of Students - Yes or No**

"We don't have streaming." (Principal 1)

"Well we just do it now with, this is a system we brought in last year and it has worked very well. We just divided them plain and simple." (Principal 2)

"Well we stream them ... I would think I would probably have one weak class at the end. I don't think there should be, there are certain kids you just can't mix because they're just not able and it's just not fair to them and then I'd mix them." (Principal 3)

"There's no disadvantage to any student within our school. They're put in with mixed ability. Two groups are done alphabetically. There's no discrimination at that level." (Teacher 3)

Of the four schools involved in this study only one operates a system of streaming, "We stream them" (Principal 3). As outlined within Chapter Two, Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004) note that there are concerns for the needs of students placed within a lower stream in schools. Schools which operate alternative systems to streaming are providing for mixed abilities and avoiding the labelling of students: "We don't have streaming" (Principal 1); "We just divided them plain and simple" (Principal 2) and "They're put in with mixed ability. Two groups are done alphabetically. There's no discrimination at that level" (Teacher 3). Furthermore, the implementation of non-streaming approaches emphasises the need for mixed ability teaching and student-centered approaches which will meet the educational needs of the student. The use of streaming within schools must be viewed as a mechanism of power and control for schools. Through streaming, principals

and teachers in second level schools are creating different paths for different students. Rather than creating a diverse mix within the school system, a segregation of students is occurring; a segregation which impacts on teachers' expectations and, as identified within Dean's case, students' expectations of themselves. Furthermore, such segregation maintains social order and reflects exclusion evident within society as a whole.

The ambiguity attached to the purpose of schools and education, as discussed previously within this chapter, must be viewed as contributing to the existence of streaming within the education system. Schools are placed in a central position, by society and the education system, in the 'delivery' of students to third level or further education. Simultaneously, schools have the responsibility of 'developing' well-rounded and competent students. There is a 'dilemma' within schools, and the education system, which revolves around whether the primary function is to 'deliver' or 'develop' students. The dichotomy within the education system is between the need to 'deliver' students capable of creating a sustainable economy, or creating a more equal society. The evidence from the principals indicates that economic sustainability is gaining precedence.

This research illustrates streaming of students is not universal among schools. The scope of this research does not allow a quantitative analysis of the number of schools in Galway City, or nationally, which are implementing a system of streaming. However, the different approaches implemented by different schools in relation to streaming reflects the capacity of second level schools to develop individual policy to meet the ethos of their own schools, thereby highlighting the power retained by second level schools and the limited influence the Department of Education and Science has in relation to policy development.

**Inclusive and Exclusive Schools**

Inclusion and inclusive education is a central focus of the research. The interviews provide an opportunity to explore inclusion in schools.

**Figure 5-12 - Diversity, Inclusion and Exclusion**

“A school that they sense that they belong, that they’re, they’re appreciated that they are successful, successful at school, you know that, that this is a successful place for me, I’m happy here.” (Principal 1)

Cont’d overleaf

"Galway City is a very interesting place to do this study ... You have apartheid of education here. And it's not said, but it's done ... You have the instance there is a polarization of people, that school is for them and this school is for us ... The inclusivity of some schools works to the benefit of the exclusivity of everybody else, because they're off the hook, right. So the more you try to be inclusive, the easier it is for your peer principals in schools to be exclusive."

(Principal 1)

"We do have a great mix, different cultures. We have lots of different visible disabilities. We have autistic children and they are all treated and they are not subject to bullying and that is something I could say that doesn't go on here."

(Teacher 2)

"There are means and ways, certain schools will exclude certain students."

(Teacher 2)

"There are some schools that will not exclude them and will hold onto them at any cost, but on the other hand then there are a few that will be getting rid of them and don't see them as their problem." (Education Personnel 6)

"Some people would see it as a failure if they had to get rid of someone and yet other schools maybe see it as an opportunity to get rid of them so that they can concentrate on the rest you know." (Education Personnel 6)

"Then you sit in a staff room and you listen to them talking most disparagingly about some students and most glowingly about others; usually the academically bright and the sporting gifted and everybody else is a nuisance." (Education Personnel 4)

"Sometimes teachers think you can suspend them, get rid of them, and it really isn't an option in an awful lot of incidences." (Principal 2)



“Well with our statistics that we are coming up with there are higher numbers of children being excluded and expelled, suspended and expelled.” (Education Personnel 6)

“Well, my views are while DEIS offered economic assistance to schools, who were trying to support students at risk, that while it was positive at that level, that it just compounded the whole theme of apartheid within the school level education system.” (Teacher 1)

“What the Department do need to look at ... Entrance criteria, entrance policies at schools, you know, I suppose it's very much up to, especially in the voluntary secondary schools, it's very much up to the individual schools to decide on their entrance criteria and you know, I think often it could be used to exclude students that aren't desirable.” (Education Personnel 1)

“Certainly categorising the school as a certain type has been wrong ... The way it's been done has created a situation where ghettoisation has been promoted actually ... If children from certain [sic] from either disadvantaged ethnic groups or disadvantaged areas have had the tradition of going to certain schools it is not easy to say to their parents that they should go to other ones. It mightn't even be desirable so it is a very difficult problem and it can be compounded by the fact that some schools without question, whereas they may not say it openly, make every effort to ensure that they do not get certain students.” (Education Personnel 3)

“Segregation is happening at enrolment stage and that's very hard for the Department to tackle because it is happening in local communities ... It is not the intention of the Department to interfere with the right of a Board of Management to manage the affairs of the school in the way it sees fit.”  
(Department of Education and Science Official)

“I think the whole thing that we have to divide people to learn is absolutely scandalous. That you know that one social group has to go to one area and another social group has to go to a different area for housing and for schooling.” (Teacher 3)

The perceptions of the education personnel provide a significant insight into the level of inclusion/exclusion of students which occurs within Galway City, “Galway City is a very interesting place to do this study ... You have apartheid of education here. And it’s not said, but it’s done ... You have the instance there is a polarization of people, that school is for them and this school is for us ... The inclusivity of some schools works to the benefit of the exclusivity of everybody else” (Principal 1). While not defining inclusion or exclusion this principal identifies that the inclusionary policies/practices of some schools is facilitating the exclusionary policies/practices of other schools in the city. The factors identified within the data as contributing to the development of an inclusion/exclusion divide among schools in Galway City are discussed presently.

One contributory factor to exclusion is policy developed by local schools. As discussed earlier in the research (Chapter Two, Section: Second Level Education System – Ireland), schools, particularly secondary schools, have their own Boards of Management and are in a position to develop rules, regulations and policies specific to their school. The following extracts from the data illustrate localised school policies are contributing to exclusion of students: “Entrance criteria, entrance policies at schools, you know, I suppose it’s very much up to, especially in the voluntary secondary schools, it’s very much up to the individual schools to decide on their entrance criteria” (Education Personnel 1) and “There are means and ways, certain schools will exclude certain students” (Teacher 2). The views presented highlight the fact that some second level schools are developing enrolment policies which may include, or exclude, students. Of further concern is the response of the Department of Education and Science Official, which outlines the limitations on the Department to tackle this issue: “Segregation is happening at enrolment stage and that’s very hard for the Department to tackle because it is happening in local communities ... It is not the intention of the Department to interfere with the right of a Board of Management to manage the affairs of the school in the way it sees fit” (Department of Education and Science Official). There is a real sense of tension and frustration among the sample group

operating in disadvantaged schools towards national policy, the Department of Education and Science and other schools in Galway City. Furthermore, the implications of the development of such segregation in second level schools in Galway City will impact on the ability of current and future national policy to tackle disaffection and early school leaving.

“Certainly categorising the school as a certain type has been wrong ... The way it’s been done has created a situation where ghettoisation has been promoted” (Education Personnel 3). The data introduces a level of tension among second level education providers and implementers in Galway City. The tension emerges due to the implementation of national policy through local programmes. Government policy focuses on the delivery of supports through a system of designating schools as disadvantaged. The evidence indicates that “while DEIS offered economic assistance to schools, who were trying to support students at risk ... it just compounded the whole theme of apartheid within the school level education system” (Teacher 1). This suggests that such a policy has extremely negative effects on second level education in Galway City. Government policy, such as DEIS, has developed a segregated system of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools. National policy has developed a system, as one teacher described it, with a “theme of apartheid within the school level education system” (Teacher 1). Within the context of national policy, schools which are designated as disadvantaged have attracted students with specific educational needs or at risk of disaffection. Furthermore, students with the above profiles are being pushed by non-disadvantaged schools towards the resources being provided in the disadvantaged schools. Conversely, the ‘most academic’ students are moving towards the non-disadvantaged schools in Galway City.

A second level education system which supports such segregation within schools is, consciously or unconsciously, supporting segregation and separation within society. The evidence supports the suggestion that the second level school system in Galway City is creating a system of exclusion, “I think the whole thing that we have to divide people to learn is absolutely scandalous. That you know that one social group has to go to one area and another social group has to go to a different area for housing and for schooling” (Teacher 3). As a result there will be significant long-term effects on Galway City. For as long as the profile within schools is different to the profile of society the promotion of an inclusive and equal society in Galway City will be extremely challenging. Furthermore, in the context of the limitations of national structures to create and promote change in the community, the impetus for change lies with the community organisations, parents and students themselves.

Insights into the views of staff within schools are provided “You sit in a staff room and you listen to them talking most disparagingly about some students and most glowingly about others; usually the academically bright and the sporting gifted and everybody else is a nuisance” (Education Personnel 4) and “Some people would see it as a failure if they had to get rid of someone and yet other schools maybe see it as an opportunity to get rid of them so that they can concentrate on the rest you know” (Education Personnel 6). Furthermore, “There are a few [schools] that will be getting rid of them and don’t see them as their problem” (Education Personnel 6). However, as described by Ainscow et al. (2006), schools are aware of inclusion but not fully sure of what it means and how it should operate within the day-to-day operations of the school. Such an analysis introduces a significant issue in relation to inclusive education in Ireland. While there are references to inclusion within national policy and documentation there is a lack of clarity. Inclusion within an Irish context, in contrast to integration, needs to be defined, communicated and implemented through the system. Without a clear policy and support for schools, the development of inclusion will be limited and inconsistent from school to school. Moreover, “There are higher numbers of children being excluded and expelled” (Education Personnel 6).

In contrast to the descriptions of exclusionary practices and policies, there are descriptions of schools which are inclusive in their structure and ethos: “A school that they sense they belong ... they’re appreciated” (Principal 1); “We do have a great mix, different cultures. We have lots of different visible disabilities. We have autistic children and they are all treated and they are not subject to bullying and that is something I could say that doesn’t go on here” (Teacher 2) and “There are some schools that will not exclude them and will hold onto them at any cost” (Education Personnel 6). The volume of data relating to inclusive practices and policies within this data indicates that the schools mentioned in this paragraph are the exception rather than the rule.

The evidence presented outlines significant differences between the definitions of inclusion provided by CSIE (2002) and Sheehy et al. (2005) and those presented within this study. While there are references to diversity and inclusion, there are also references to exclusion, division and segregation within schools. The lack of inclusion which is reflected in the data has implications for policy. Underpinning the development of future policy will be the need for consensus on the understanding of inclusion, the promotion of inclusive education practices within schools through leadership/teacher training and the promotion of the student voice within the Irish education system.

The discussion within Chapter Two and the data presented in relation to inclusion provide a justification for a shift in focus within current policy, including education. The targeted system of supports developed within education is further reinforcing disadvantage and exclusion. Any attempts to tackle exclusion, in particular exclusion within education, must be underpinned by a universal rather than targeted approach. This approach will require a fundamental shift in perspective among those involved in policy development. Such a shift in perspective will involve the development of services/supports for all. This type of shift within an education system would represent a movement towards education for all.

### **Deficit Discourse**

The language inherent in the interviews reflects a deficit discourse whereby students are viewed in a negative light. As previously discussed, deficit discourse is described as viewing people, students in this case, as having a disability, needing to 'fit-in' and placing blame on the student for his or her perceived 'inadequacies'.

#### **Figure 5-13 - Deficit Discourse - An Insight into Normality as a Social Construct**

"I suppose that there seems to be a perception there that we cater well for weaker kids." (Principal 1)

"Tradition in the school was that the weaker kids were put into art and the others were made to do history ... You're going to get all the slow learner boys; you're going to get a lot of kids that are labelled at an early age. But equally the slower learners are as important as any other kid; I don't feel one [sic] I really feel once we take them you deliver." (Principal 2)

"They're saying 'Ah but I'm stupid, sure that everybody knows I'm stupid' and it's awful to hear that ... They're picking it up I suppose from where they've been placed in the school if they are going out to see a special teacher, having an assessment done, I mean kids do pick up on things."  
(Education Personnel 6)

"First of all they don't have the ability to do it [the Leaving Cert.] the intellectual ability, not that they don't have the ability to do other things ... I would think I would probably have one weak class at the end." (Principal 3)

“I suppose that there seems to be a perception there that we cater well for weaker kids” (Principal 1) and “Tradition in the school was that the weaker kids were put into art and the others were made to do history ... You’re going to get all the slow learner boys; you’re going to get a lot of kids that are labelled at an early age” (Principal 2). The evidence indicates the language used about, and towards, students in schools can be that of a ‘deficit’ nature. The use of deficit discourses such as ‘weak’, ‘slow learners’ and ‘stupid’ are still linked to the deficit model of thinking rather than the social model of thinking as described by Reiser (2001) (cited in Sheehy et al, 2005, p16). The research data implies that the individual is seen as being at fault, rather than the system. The student is seen as being ‘weak’ or ‘slow’, rather than focusing on the system and changing the system to meet the needs of the students. The use of such language is inherent within the system and is accepted without challenge. However, it is unclear whether the use of such language is a definitive tool to exclude students or language which has been traditionally circulated within schools without due consideration for the impact it has on students. Principal 3 states that “I would probably have one weak class”, this school operates a streaming system. Consequently, it could be argued that streaming and such deficit discourse are linked.

On the basis of the desire for emancipation of some and the wishes of others to prevent such emancipation (Horkheimer, 1995, cited in Brookfield, 2005), there is an argument that the existence and use of such language has its origins in perpetuating the middle class ethos of teachers. Regardless of the level of thought engaged in prior to using negative language, it illustrates, despite the suggestion of an understanding of inclusion, that there is evidence that practices are influenced by the social class ethos of teachers. An observation noted through the research journal, as the interview process progressed it became evident that those involved in education in Galway City were aware of the need to use inclusive language and terminology, but throughout the interview process practices and examples emerged which suggested that evidence of inclusion, both theory and practice, was limited and superficial. Data included in this section, Section: Inclusive and Exclusive Schools and Section: Student Profile and Background support the above observation.

Alternatively, the view can be taken that current policy requires schools, and staff within them, to use this type of language to access the resources required to fully support students at risk of disaffection, specifically those with special educational needs. As discussed previously, the ‘web of policies’ can be counteractive and it could be suggested that policy requires such language to be used within schools by staff and ultimately by students to

access formal supports. As indicated within the review of literature, national policy utilises medical terminology and consequently schools are required to use similar language. Furthermore, the use of such language impacts on students. The evidence presented within Chapter Four supports the suggestion that students are aware of the language being used to describe them and the use of such language in schools results in self-negativity and poor self-image.

Within the context of normality as a social construct, schools are in a position in which the language used within the school can be altered and restructured into a positive framework. Through leadership, as outlined by Thomas et al. (2000), schools can create a culture of non-deficit language, a language which supports and values the students. As discussed previously within the study, Mittler (2000) has identified the need for the development of supportive and positive language within schools. It is evident that the promotion of inclusive language within schools requires a greater understanding and appreciation of the benefits of inclusion within a school setting. This reiterates the need for the implementation of policies which promote inclusion among schools and provide staff with the required understanding of what inclusive education entails. Currently, students who do not achieve, or display behaviour which may be challenging, are not valued and are excluded from the system unless they adapt and 'fit-in'.

### **Teachers and Teaching**

Teachers are central to the delivery of education in Ireland and as a result many of the interviews made reference to teaching and teachers.

#### **Figure 5-14 - Teachers, Teaching and Avoidance**

"I suppose change in attitude, or that was perceivable here. I went through 2<sup>nd</sup> level years ago, there was an obvious streaming, and the weakest academic children were really just thrown on the pile. They were not given the attention. They were given as what we perceive as being the worst teachers."

(Principal 1)

"It can be difficult. The reality is there are teachers in every school who should probably never have been teaching and the system that's there unfortunately allows them to stay there." (Principal 3)

Cont'd overleaf

"Relationship is hugely undervalued and teachers don't appreciate the power they have over kids; you have the power to build and the power to destroy ...

We underestimate our power and relationship; we underestimate the importance of relationship." (Principal 2)

"Where the best teachers, in inverted commas, are allocated to the best classes and the other students are left floundered." (Education Personnel 3)

"We're lucky we only have one or two but a lot of schools, that's an area where the government haven't taken the bull by the horns and said 'look it' this is disaffected teachers." (Principal 3)

"I'd say first of all, every teacher should see that it's incumbent on them to make every effort to keep children in school." (Education Personnel 2)

"But I think that teachers, I have to say the vast majority of the teachers in schools that we work in are very supportive of the young people they teach."  
(Education Personnel 1)

"Nearly every school in Ireland there are some wonderful teachers. And there are people who if you like are rowing a small little punt in a big sea and they're doing a wonderful job of bringing people with them, and that could be a school in the inner-city, it could be a school in a disadvantaged suburb."  
(Education Personnel 4)

"[The need to raise the expectations levels] that the teachers have of Traveller children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. You hear stories all the time; for example where you might have a teacher who thinks they're doing a kindness to a child, a Traveller child by not giving him homework."  
(Department of Education and Science Official)



"I have seen teachers who take an interest in several different pupils to bring them through and people who are disaffected, we have a pastoral system that we try keep an eye on people and flag them and see what's going." (Principal

3)

"Teacher expectations? ... The child is judged before they come into the school at all, or it might not be basically a surname it could just be from the location they're coming from." (Education Personnel 3)

"You know that teachers will get very frustrated because they're aware that there's a lot of issues for these kids outside of school, but they don't have time to address them." (Education Personnel 1)

"We would be aware of is a hell of a lot of teachers don't really empathise with the disadvantaged so if you like there becomes a kind of a polarisation sort of conflict situation ... Most conflicts really are conflicts of values, conflicts of norms. We'll say it is a conflict between the norm of the teacher you know which would be a middle class norm in terms of courtesy and etiquette." (Education Personnel 4)

"It is demoralising for the teachers who are doing their damndest to be coming into those schools and working in a way with expectations that are set so low by the students belting away at that on a daily basis to try and erase that." (Teacher 1)

"You know, it is common enough for teachers to experience threatening behaviour and even sometimes violent behaviour and certainly non-friendly behaviour in disadvantaged schools; you need to be trained to deal with that." (Education Personnel 4)

“I would think there’s a lot of burn out amongst teachers. There’s pain for the teachers and from perhaps what the students have to do as well ... Huge levels of pain and stress within the teaching profession and over work.” (Teacher 3)

“I think teacher training colleges, universities, colleges need to engage in this area.” (Education Personnel 2)

As noted within Chapter Four, the data provides evidence that there are issues with teachers in the education system who do not have the required skills, or possibly the motivation, to meet the needs of students in second level education. “The reality is there are teachers in every school who should probably never have been teaching and the system that’s there unfortunately allows them to stay there” (Principal 3). Furthermore, teachers who are in this position are retained within the education system, “The government haven’t taken the bull by the horns and said ‘look it’ this is disaffected teachers” (Principal 3). The potential implications for students who are being taught by such teachers are substantial, especially if the students are vulnerable and have specific educational needs. The evidence of the existence of such teachers within schools raises the issue of selection and training of teachers, along with the ongoing supports throughout their teaching career, “I think teaching colleges, universities, colleges need to engage in this area” (Teacher 3). Teachers require skills to meet the varying educational needs, and other related needs, of students within second level schools. The evidence indicates that in specific schools the ability of teachers is linked to the ability of the students to which they are allocated:

“The best teachers (in inverted commas) are allocated to the best classes and the other students are left floundered.” (Education Personnel 3)

Therefore, the ‘best’ teacher can be allocated to the ‘best’ class. Conversely, the data would support the view that the ‘worst’ teacher can be allocated to the ‘worst’ class, “They were given as what we perceive as being the worst teachers” (Principal 1). The profile of these so called ‘worst’ classes may include vulnerable students who are disaffected with education and consequently at risk of leaving. The implications of such practices within an education system are immense, particularly for the student. The existence of such a system within certain schools promotes exclusion, inequality, labelling and ultimately disaffection among students.

In the context of the promotion of inclusion, the existence of such an ethos within schools raises significant concerns for the development of inclusive education practices, both locally and nationally. The need for policies which directly impact on practices, rather than the development of programmes, is required to create an environment in which students believe they are valued and encouraged. The interviews identify the existence of a mismatch between the norms/values of the teachers and those of the students. This mismatch results in confrontation and tension between the teacher and student which is manifested, as outlined within this research, in the low expectations of students: “Teacher expectations? ... The child is judged before they come into the school at all, or it might not be basically a surname it could just be from the location they’re coming from” (Education Personnel 3) and “[The need to raise the expectations levels] that the teachers have of Traveller children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Department of Education and Science Official). Central to this issue is the need for schools to focus on the educational needs of the students and how these needs can be met by teachers. In the absence of such an approach, conflict will continue to emerge and re-emerge in schools throughout Ireland.

Education Personnel 4 outlines a fundamental difference between the values and norms of teachers and the students they are teaching:

“We would be aware of is a hell of a lot of teachers don’t really empathise with the disadvantaged so if you like there becomes a kind of a polarisation sort of conflict situation ... Most conflicts really are conflicts of values, conflicts of norms. We’ll say it is a conflict between the norm of the teacher you know which would be a middle class norm in terms of courtesy and etiquette.” (Education Personnel 4)

A critical analysis of such data would forward that schools are fulfilling the depiction as a mechanism for the maintenance of social order, an order which suppresses some students, especially students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Linked to this issue is the position of power retained by teachers within schools, “We underestimate our power and relationship; we underestimate the importance of relationship” (Principal 2).

There are some extremely capable and motivated teachers within the education system. “Nearly every school in Ireland there are some wonderful teachers” (Education Personnel 4); “I have seen teachers who take an interest in several different pupils to bring them

through and people who are disaffected” (Principal 3) and “But I think that teachers, I have to say the vast majority of the teachers in schools that we work in are very supportive of the young people they teach” (Education Personnel 1). Furthermore, there are teachers who want to work, and are working, with students who are disaffected and at risk of leaving the school system. The data also imply that teachers, effective or ineffective, are working within a stressful environment in which challenging behaviour from students is encountered on a regular basis. “It is common enough for teachers to experience threatening behaviour and even sometimes violent behaviour and certainly non-friendly behaviour in disadvantaged schools” (Education Personnel 4). Indeed the students involved in this study admitted to being involved in dealing with challenging behaviour. As highlighted, there are health and safety implications for students and consequently implications for teachers, schools and school management.

**Early School Leaving and Student Disaffection from Others’ Perspectives**

Disaffection among students was discussed in detail by the education personnel.

**Figure 5-15 - Disaffection - Reality in Schools**

“I mean we would find, once pupils transfer from primary, you know, it’s often a slippery slope. You know, it’s a matter of time before they leave us and you put supports in place and some of the students we would have been working with maybe from third or fourth class.” (Education Personnel 1)

“I suppose early school leaving is not a new phenomenon and it’s not a new area of study or concern for the Department.” (Principal 1)

“Threatening behaviour and even sometimes violent behaviour and certainly non-friendly behaviour in disadvantaged schools.” (Department of Education Official)

“The thing about the early school leavers now is there isn’t as many of them. I don’t think, not in our school anyway. There’s not as many leaving.” (Principal 2)

Cont’d overleaf

“The numbers not transferring from primary to post-primary are horrendous; falling out at first, second year, not completing any of the state exams, junior or senior cycle are still astronomical. It's still only a very very small minority that manage to get through it and you know society is as equally to blame as the cultural negativities within the Travelling community.” (Department of Education and Science Official)

“There are people dropping out ... If they are coming to us as a case and they are going to be 16 in June and they are in Junior Cert, we are not taking them on as a top priority. If there was a younger child in primary school who was missing large numbers of days, we would see that more of a priority than...”  
(Education Personnel 6)

“The numbers and proportions are not significantly different now to what they were back then ... Of the order of 4-5 thousand, which are still the numbers today which makes you think sometimes well look, were we doing anything?”  
(Education Personnel 5)

“We would notice them not bringing schoolbags home, not even writing down the homework, where there was no tradition of the backup support at home ...  
Coming late to school, not having books, not bringing books home, not having a care about the academic side of things but this could still work if they are coming ... They have lost the relationship, they have the lost the connection entirely with the school, and if you feel like that's it, there is nothing else you could do.” (Principal 1)

“[Disaffection] being late for class and then when they are pulled up on things, responding very badly and you know maybe shouting and roaring and being very disrespectful to teachers, abusive to teachers.” (Education Personnel 1)

**“They would be the ones that present the most behavioural difficulties, with the lateness, absenteeism.” (Teacher 2)**

**“I have seen disaffection. Well it presents itself in terms of a kind of unwillingness to engage with the curriculum, unwillingness to engage with teachers, unwillingness very often to engage with the other students and generally be unhappy and just not prepared to do anything.” (Education Personnel 3)**

**“They’re bored, they’re lacking motivation, they don’t want to do it where as typically if they’re doing something they enjoy and something that stimulates them and they have a fair bit of input into it.” (Teacher 3)**

As indicated in Chapter Two, early school leaving continues to be an issue within the second level education system in Ireland: “I suppose early school leaving is not a new phenomenon and it’s not a new area of study or concern for the Department” (Principal 1); “The numbers not transferring from primary to post-primary are horrendous; falling out at first, second year, not completing any of the state exams, junior or senior cycle are still astronomical” (Department of Education and Science Official); “The numbers and proportions are not significantly different now to what they were back then” (Education Personnel 5) and “There are people dropping out” (Education Personnel 6). While one principal believes “[early school leavers] there isn’t as many of them ... not in our school anyway” (Principal 1).

As is evident within Chapters Two and Four, the key characteristics of disaffection are lack of interest, difficult behaviour, lack of engagement, suspension and absenteeism. The symptoms and complexity of disaffection are evident from the data presented within this section: “Coming late to school, not having books, not bringing books home, not having a care about the academic side of things but this could still work if they are coming” (Principal 1); “They would be the ones that present the most behavioural difficulties, with the lateness, absenteeism” (Teacher 2) and “Well it presents itself in terms of a kind of unwillingness to engage with the curriculum, unwillingness to engage with teachers, unwillingness very often to engage with the other students and generally be unhappy and just not prepared to do anything” (Education Personnel 3). Based on the data analysis in

relation to student disaffection included in Chapters Four and Five, a model of the Complexity of Disaffection has been developed. The model is presented and discussed in Chapter Six.

As stated in Chapter Four, the existence of aggressive behaviours places the teachers and other students at risk of physical injury, while the student perpetrating the aggression is at risk of exclusion from the school. “Being late for class and then when they are pulled up on things, responding very badly and you know maybe shouting and roaring and being very disrespectful to teachers, abusive to teachers” (Education Personnel 1). Therefore, the causes of disaffection and such aggression need to be addressed through national and local policy. The evidence implies that the educational needs of students are not being met by schools. Schools have to create an environment in which disaffected students are being supported and feel valued. The continuing existence of disaffection is in the context of the development of national policy to tackle early school leaving, such as the School Completion Programme. The effectiveness of such programmes cannot be formally assessed due the lack of an evaluation process but the evidence within this study suggests that the focus of policy should be on the practices of schools rather than further external programmes.

The data presented in this section, and in the Section: Teachers and Teaching, illustrates the need for supports and training for school personnel with a focus on inclusive practices. As outlined previously, there is a need for students to be supported and valued but teachers also need schools to support them in managing specific situations as they arise. Teachers, through training and ongoing professional development, should acquire the skills to engage with students, form relationships and manage inappropriate behaviour as it arises. The retention of students of all backgrounds, gender and cultures within the education system will require teachers to have a broader range of skills, which can be drawn upon as required. In order for such training to be provided it is necessary for teachers to gain skills prior to entering a formal teaching setting, but more importantly to refresh and develop these skills further while working within the education system. Therefore, there is a need in teacher training to promote inclusion as being broader than just special educational needs and provide an understanding of the barriers which exist for students within education. The barriers which emerged within this study include: low expectations among teachers, labelling of students, lack of supportive relationships with students to facilitate learning and progression within the education system, and the use of language which impacts on students’ capacity to remain engaged with the education system.

Furthermore, there is a role for school management to develop the skills of teachers while within their school. Future policy should ensure that programmes, such as the School Completion Programme and other agencies working with local schools, can work with staff in relation to engaging with students through inclusive practices which reduce barriers to full participation in the education system.

As suggested in Chapter Four, as well as being a symptom of disaffection, challenging behaviour is a statement of disquiet; disquiet towards a system, and schools, which reinforce social division experienced within society. Schools can be challenging, unsafe and vulnerable locations for students, "Threatening behaviour and even sometimes violent behaviour and certainly non-friendly behaviour in disadvantaged schools" (Department of Education Official). Furthermore, the power held by teachers and principals is resisted by students through the presentation of challenging behaviour and disengagement from the system.

### **National Policy**

Previously, a critical analysis of current policies in operation within the education system has taken place. The evidence presented in this section provides further insights into the difficulties encountered with policy implementation.

#### **Figure 5-16 - Policy - Implementation or Irritation**

"I know in a cluster near where we are, all they did was fight about the money, divvy it up and forget forget [sic] about, about desired outcomes or anything like that ... I would say that in my view most of these programmes are, the sort of ideology or the objectives are abandoned for whatever is expedient 'get the money give me the cash'." (Education Personnel 4)

"Absolutely! I think that is a real aspect. I think there is a really interesting tension in all of that ... The reverse trend from top-down is very much in a mode that says 'here's the national programme you deliver it and here's the support service to help you deliver it', which doesn't at all have the dynamic as that of a bottom up approach." (Education Personnel 5)

Cont'd overleaf



“EPSEN Act which has obviously been deferred indefinitely at the moment ...

The whole point of the EPSSEN Act was moving more to a child centered approach, more of a needs based approach rather than looking purely at a diagnosis.” (Education Personnel 7)

“Rights based aspects of the legislation, they haven’t been enacted and they are deferred indefinitely and that causes a problem because it takes away from the kind of impetus, you know, there was a, we were [sic], there was a particular direction we were heading in and now it’s kind of an uncertain future in the sense that if you knew you were heading towards a system whereby every child would be entitled to, certainly their educational plan and they were entitled to that being reviewed and they were entitled to it being implemented.”

(Education Personnel 7)

“The Department are always lagging behind. They are never up to the minute with what is happening in the schools. They’re not clued in and sometimes they’re so focused on the higher things.” (Principal 1)

Communication and trust are central to the implementation of policy. However, there is an absence of both characteristics within the Irish education system. Through lack of communication and trust, tension is created within the system which impacts on the implementation of policy: “The Department are always lagging behind. They are never up to the minute with what is happening in the schools. They’re not clued in and sometimes they’re so focused on the higher things” (Principal 1). The literature review discussed the intention-reality gap as described by Sheehy et al. (2005), which suggests policy can vary significantly from ‘what was envisaged’ to ‘what actually is being implemented’. “I would say that in my view most of these programmes are, the sort of ideology or the objectives are abandoned for whatever is expedient ‘get the money give me the cash’” (Education Personnel 4). Furthermore, Education Personnel 4 believes “There is a really interesting tension in all of that”.

The evidence presented emphasises the existence of an intention-reality gap in relation to both the EPSSEN Act (2004) and the National Education Welfare Board (as described in Chapter Two). In particular, the EPSSEN Act (2004) raises significant concerns, as the

implementation of the legislation has been deferred. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004), as described in Chapter Two, was viewed as an extremely progressive step forward for the Disability Movement, as well as for people with special educational needs in Ireland. While certain criticisms have been levelled at the legislation, the introduction of such legislation was broadly welcomed as a movement in the right direction. However, such optimism must now be faltering as the evidence within this research states that the “Rights based aspects of the legislation, they haven’t been enacted and they are deferred indefinitely” (Education Personnel 7). The deferral of such legislation impacts on students with special educational needs and their ability to remain within the formal education system.

The deferral of the implementation of this legislation suggests, at a minimum, a level of indifference within the Irish government to the rights of people with special educational needs. The denial of rights enshrined within the legislation could be described as immoral, divisive and open to dispute. Moreover, the progression of the disability and inclusive education movement within Ireland will be extremely challenging. Furthermore, the deferral of the implementation illustrates the existence of an intention-reality gap in relation to formal legislation. “EPSEN Act which has obviously been deferred indefinitely at the moment” (Education Personnel 7), the implications of an indefinite deferral of the implementation of EPSEN legislation (Government of Ireland, 2004) directly impacts on the rights of students with special educational needs and the supports the students receive to help them while in education. The reality of the indefinite deferral in implementing this legislation is that students with special educational needs will not be in a position to benefit fully from the education system; failure to include is a denial of resources, support and materials required to remain within the education system and realise their full potential.

**Student Profile and Background**

The social, cultural and economic background of students and the links to disaffection emerge through the interviews with schools and education personnel.

**Figure 5-17 - Students - Where do they come from?**

“We need to up the level of expectation the families have about their children, that the children have of themselves.” (Department of Education and Science Official)

Cont’d overleaf

"We are leaving kids in situations that are not safe emotionally and that are doing damage to kids and I am not critical of parents but I just think that somebody needs to step in and say it's not good enough." (Principal 2)

"One of the children said to me this year and I was quite upset about it she said '[name of teacher]', we were in a maths class, she said 'I am going to be your employer'. I said to her 'that's fantastic, are you going to set up a business?', 'No, [name of teacher]' she said, 'I am going to be on the dole and your tax is going to pay for my wages'. And I just thought you are 14 years of age and if this is what you are thinking, the whole idea of trying to promote a career and options afterwards and that's what I find difficult." (Teacher 2)

"There's a very changed family situation and I think the extended family support isn't there. Poverty is grinding a lot of people down. The social environment is very impoverished I think in certain quarters of the city ... You know if there is insufficient economic resources they tend to miss a lot of time at school and then that all builds up into falling behind in their curriculum and they get into negative downward spirals, so that can be difficult." (Teacher 3)

"[School] It's very structured. Whereas what they're going home to half the time, you don't know if they're going home to parents or whether they're not there ... If there's no support from home it's very very difficult to keep it going from within the school because it's too easy then for them to opt out and you have excuses from home. That's one of the biggest problems."

(Principal 3)

"We haven't come to terms with two parents working, as a society, we haven't come to terms with single parent families, we haven't come to terms and we don't want to talk about it." (Principal 3)

"A lot of that depends on the home background, if the support isn't there, if there is a lot going on at home ... If there is huge stresses at home, and there just, there isn't the wherewithal the reasons, they're surviving. They're just surviving." (Principal 1)

“I think I’d have to say one of the things I see as the primary reason would be family circumstances. If the young person is coming from an unstable family environment where there could be substance abuse problems, there could be domestic violence, there could be, you know, socio-economic disadvantage and a general lack of interest or value being placed on education by parents. That has a huge impact on a young person’s view of education.” (Education Personnel 1)

“[Teachers] complaining that such a student didn’t have a copy, didn’t have a pen or didn’t have a book ... But you look into it in more detail, you might find that there is total chaos obtaining in the particular house in the morning.” (Education Personnel 3)

“Non-attendance within the Travelling community would be very high and that’s not just related to Galway City, it’s replicated throughout the country.” (Education Personnel 6)

“If the young person is coming from an unstable family environment where there could be substance abuse problems, there could be domestic violence, there could be, you know, socio-economic disadvantage and a general lack of interest or value being placed on education by parents. That has a huge impact on a young person’s view of education” (Education Personnel 1). Through this and other quotes from the data, the issue of socio-economic disadvantage and cultural background is identified. Teachers, principals and education personnel suggest socio-economic and cultural background impact on student retention within the education system. The data illustrate the impact family circumstances have on the child and his or her participation in the education system. “There’s a very changed family situation and I think the extended family support isn’t there. Poverty is grinding a lot of people down. The social environment is very impoverished I think in certain quarters of the city” (Teacher 3). Families in crisis, families experiencing poverty or families from specific cultural backgrounds may not view education as a priority, which can impact negatively on the capacity of the student to participate fully in the school system. Low levels of expectation, and socio-economic issues, are strongly emphasised through a teacher quoting a student “I am going to be on the dole and your tax is going to

pay for my wages” (Teacher 2). Certainly, the data highlight difficulties teachers have in motivating and engaging students for whom education is not viewed as a priority.

“A lot of that depends on the home background, if the support isn’t there, if there is a lot going on at home” (Principal 1). Teachers and principals place blame for disaffection among students on the socio-economic background of students. Principals, in this study, identify the impact family background has on the student, and as a result, on the ability of the school to teach the student. The issue of disaffection and early school leaving is viewed as being directly linked to the socio-economic background of the student and more specifically the ability of the family to support the student through education. Significantly, in contrast to the views of the teachers and principals, the students interviewed within this survey made very limited reference to their socio-economic background and certainly did not identify it as the reason for leaving school early. Rather, the background of the student changed the perspective of the teachers towards the student. Two students, who attended different second level schools, made reference to being viewed as a ‘scumbag’ and treated accordingly. Certainly, as identified by McCoy, Darmody, Smyth and Dunne (2007) and Darmody (2007), the expectations and labelling of students due to their socio-economic background is evident within this study.

Education policy in Ireland has focused on tackling educational disadvantage (Chapter Two). “We are leaving kids in situations that are not safe emotionally and that are doing damage to kids and I am not critical of parents but I just think that somebody needs to step in and say it’s not good enough” (Principal 2). The data presented indicate the need for socio-economic issues of families to be tackled. Certainly, there has been a movement towards linking education providers and external agencies but such links need to be strengthened. Furthermore, a need has been identified among those involved in supporting students, families and communities to work together, with schools, to create formal collaborations to support the student through the education system. Central to the effectiveness of any collaboration will be the extent to which the collaboration is viewed as ‘adding value’ to the work of each agency/institution. ‘Added value’ includes meeting the needs of clients/students in a more efficient and effective manner, improved resourcing and increased support. The rhetoric and territorialism of existing ‘multi-agency’ approaches needs to be replaced with a commonality of language, function and purpose. Multi-agency co-operation will only operate effectively when each agency/institution believes ‘multi-agency’ co-operation is meeting the needs of their agency/institution and their target group. Such co-operation can be supported by national policy but the greatest progression will

emerge from local communities and those involved ‘on the ground’, including teachers, principals and parents.

**Culpability Culture**

The analysis of data has identified a particular commonality. The commonality within the data suggests the existence of a ‘blame’ or ‘culpability culture’. Through the data, a theoretical framework underpinning the issue of early school leaving emerges. The data presented suggest that a ‘culpability culture’ exists in which issues or difficulties identified within the education system are blamed on someone or something else. Furthermore, rather than taking responsibility for contribution to the issues or difficulties, there is evidence of such statements as “it isn’t my fault”, for example: “Like you do have, you do have in every single school, teachers that will say it’s not my fault” (Principal 1). As evident throughout the research, teachers are hugely influential in the process of education and the development of inclusive education.

In the absence of ownership being taken by schools or teachers, the understanding of the reasons why issues with the education system exist will be limited. The ‘blame’ is aimed at individuals and systems, including the education system.

**Figure 5-18 - It’s not my fault - Culpability Culture**

“I would be very unhappy with the system at the moment. But I think that what should be challenged is every school in the country. Every school should be challenged on the same take.” (Principal 1)

“The system doesn’t suit them. We haven’t looked at young people and said look it, these people are suited to being active out doing work but at the same time out being trained.” (Principal 3)

“[Retention] depends on the home background to a great extent.” (Principal 2)

“I’ve seen that in my school and I see it from parents who are not interested either and half the problem, most of the problem, is the parents.” (Principal 3)

Cont’d overleaf

“Blaming someone whether they did it or not and they always feel very hard done by and I suppose it’s changing teacher attitudes, it’s changing the way subjects are taught in school, it’s getting away from the points system, a major cultural thing I think needs to change in schools ... We’re finding of course the schools were blaming the families, the families would blame the schools, but when you bring everybody together there is no blame going on.” (Education Personnel 6)

“I suppose the partnership in education is so important, but if you cannot get the parents in except when you get to a flashpoint or a crisis, then I think it’s very difficult for the school to be effective.” (Teacher 2)

“I’ve seen that in my school and I see it from parents who are not interested either and half the problem, most of the problem, is the parents” (Principal 3) and “Blaming someone whether they did it or not and they always feel very hard done by and I suppose it’s changing teacher attitudes” (Education Personnel 6). These interviews provide evidence that there is a ‘blame culture’ within schools. This culture is emphasised through blame being placed on various factors such as the background of the students, including the role of parents and the education system. The ‘culpability culture’ is not just restricted to school staff. There is mutual culpability. Throughout the interviews with the students, there is evidence of blame being placed on teachers and school management for their disaffection from the education system. The ‘culpability culture’ must be viewed as contributing to the complexity of the issue of disaffection. Such culpability detracts from the implementation of policy and examination of issues within the education system i.e. disaffection and early school leaving. Furthermore, the existence of such culpability contributes to tension among the key constituents within the education system. Culpability is a derivative of a lack of understanding and trust among key parties of education in Ireland. In the absence of understanding and trust, tension manifested through blame emerges. Table 5-1 illustrates the process of the development of culpability. The model of development has emerged through the analysis of data completed in Chapter Four (Section: Reasons for Early School Leaving; Section: Teachers and Teaching) and Chapter Five (Section: Teachers, Teaching and Avoidance; Section: Student Profile and Background, Section: Culpability Culture).

**Table 5-1 - Model of Culpability Development Process**

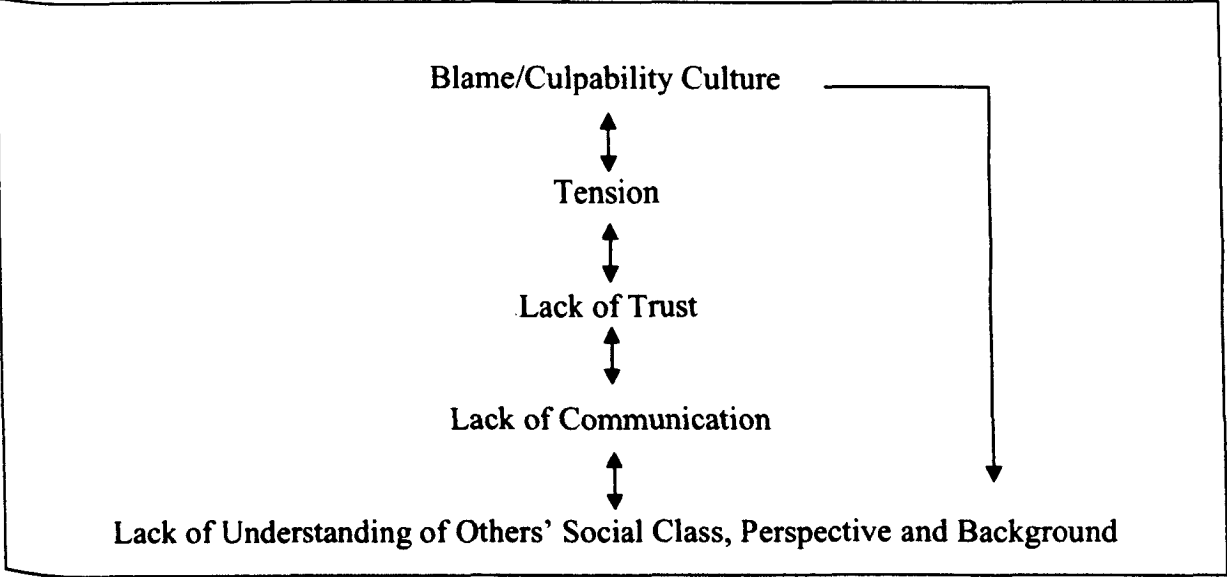


Table 5-1 outlines the culpability development process within the Irish education system. Lack of understanding of other social classes, perspectives and background, especially among teachers, contributes significantly to culpability. Due to lack of understanding and lack of perceived common ground, communication can become limited or non-existent. In the absence of communication, the development of trust is limited and consequently feeds mistrust. Based on lack of understanding, communication and trust, tension and blame will emerge. The cyclical nature of this process is important as culpability will continue to exist until the four elements outlined in Table 5-1 are addressed and overcome.

The existence of blame among school staff can be viewed as a ‘mechanism of separation’ from the issue of students leaving school early. Placing blame onto individuals, groups or society can be viewed as a removal of oneself from the cause and resolution of the problem. Furthermore, blame can suggest a lack of interest in resolving the issue at hand. On the contrary, such separation can be explained as an indication of a skills deficit or lack of ability to resolve the issue. As identified by the NASUWT (2008), teachers are trained and placed in positions to teach students and are not provided with the professional skills or training to work with families and local communities. The evidence suggests the need for such support, yet it is viewed as outside the brief of schools. As mentioned previously in this study, the need for inter-agency co-operation is required. Such co-operation requires a commonality of interest; in this case the common interest can be the student voice. The sustained existence of blame, as well as the absence of communication and co-operation among parties to the education system, will continue to facilitate a system which is failing to meet the needs of students.



## Conclusion

Through the views of the teachers, principals and education personnel, the data presented reveal significant issues which exist within the Irish education system. Disaffection and its characteristics are described by the actions of students in Chapter Four, while the experiences of teachers and principals through day-to-day contacts with students further emphasise the issue with disaffection. Issues in relation to teacher-student relationships were identified as impacting on students' participation in the education system. Furthermore, the limited impact of policy addressing early school leaving is identified through the accounts of teachers and principals. The culture and language in existence in schools are impacting negatively on the level of inclusion within the education system.

Through the collection and presentation of the data, two significant issues within the Irish education system have emerged: 1) Tension among key constituents of the education system (Department of Education and Science, schools and students) and 2) A 'culpability culture' among those who contribute to disaffection and the issue of early school leaving. In the context of policy development, inclusive education, disaffection and early school leaving, the following chapter will facilitate further discussion on the tension and 'culpability culture' which exist within the education system. Chapter Six summarises the analysis of the data presented and draws conclusions for policy and practice.

## **CHAPTER SIX – OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

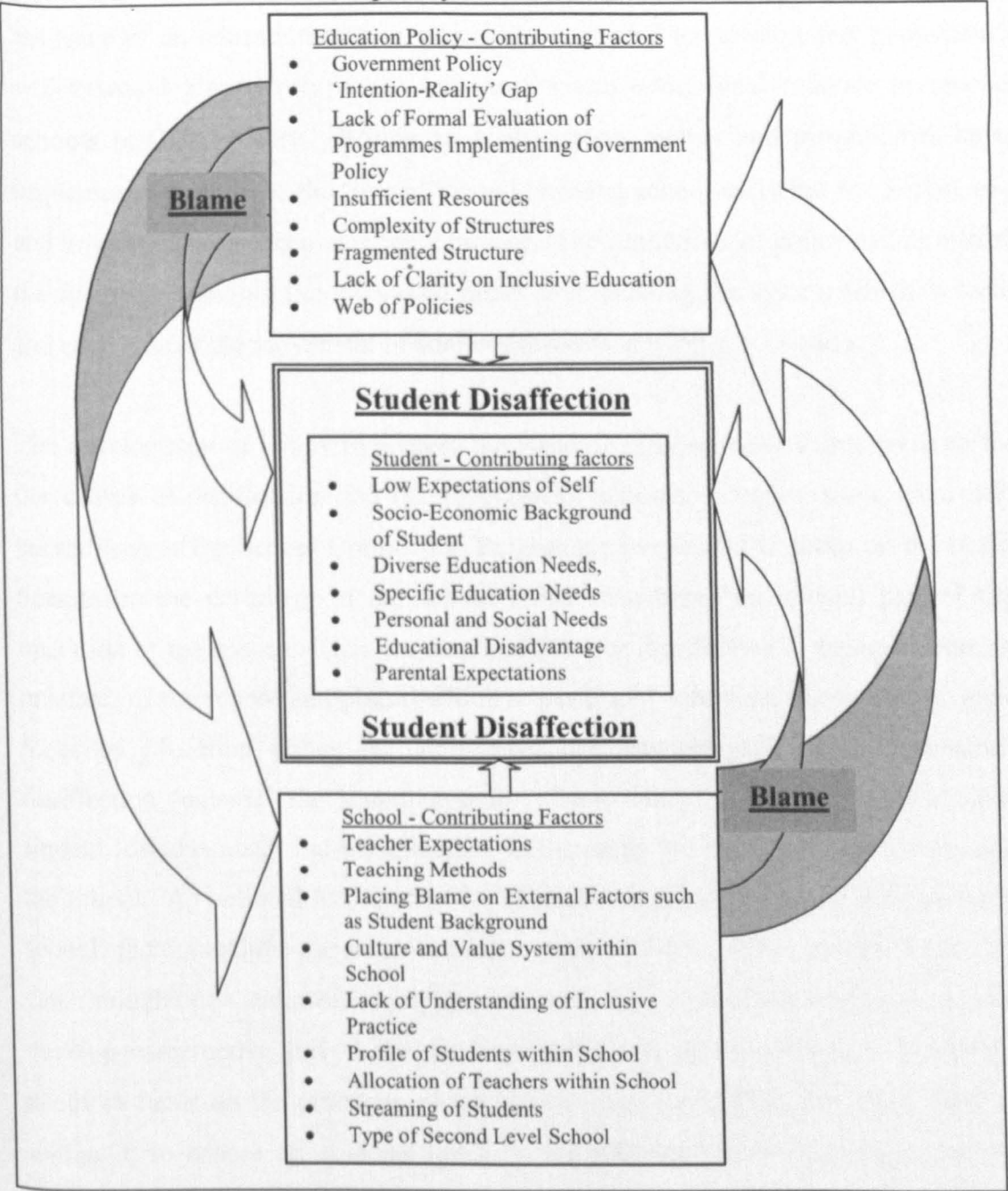
Chapter Six draws together the central themes, concepts and theoretical frameworks in relation to disaffection and early school leaving which have emerged through the study. Furthermore, acknowledging the complexity of the issue this chapter develops the topic further and provides recommendations for policy in second level education. With reflection and reflexivity being key elements of this study, a personal reflection is included which explores the impact, personal and professional, of this research process.

### **Disaffection and Early School Leaving**

Disaffection and early school leaving are significant issues within the Irish education system. Disaffection, while complex in its structure, is identifiable among students through characteristics such as aggressive behaviour, disrupted attendance, poor relationships with teachers, lack of interest and non-engagement in academic processes. The presentation of such characteristics by students must be viewed as a definitive move towards leaving the school system in advance of completing the Leaving Certificate. Through the research process, a model of the Complexity of Disaffection has emerged. While acknowledging the existence of external factors such as social and economic issues, the model (see Table 6-1) highlights the influence education policy, schools and students have in relation to disaffection. Through the critical analysis of policy (Chapter Two) and data analysis (Chapter Four and Five) the following four key areas were identified as contributing to disaffection: Education Policy, Students, School and 'Culpability Culture':

1. **Education Policy - Contributing Factors:** government education policy; 'intention-reality' gap; lack of formal evaluation of programmes implementing government policy; insufficient resources; complexity of structures within the education system; fragmented structure within the education system; lack of clarity on inclusive education and web of policies.
2. **Student Contributing Factors:** low expectations of self; socio-economic background of student (as identified in Chapter Five, Section Students Profile and Background); diverse education needs; specific education needs; personal and social needs; educational disadvantage and parental expectations.
3. **School Contributing Factors:** teacher expectations; teaching methods; placing blame on external factors such as student background; culture and value system within school; lack of understanding of inclusive practice; profile of students within school; allocation of teachers within school; streaming of students and type of second level school.
4. **Culpability Culture:** The issue of disaffection is further complicated by blame. Each constituent to disaffection places blame on another. The apportioning of blame blurs the ability to identify the 'finite' causes of the disaffection.

Table 6-1 - Model of the Complexity of Disaffection<sup>12</sup>



The model outlines how the four key areas contribute to student disaffection. With the focus of this research weighing heavily on the student voice, the research clearly indicates that schools, in particular teachers, are key contributors to disaffection and to students leaving the education system early. The students are vociferous in their condemnation of their experiences of the Irish education system. The student voice describes a second level education system which has failed to meet their educational needs. They feel alienated and devalued by a system which perpetuates the middle class values of the teachers and management and takes little account of their culture and socio-economic groupings. Their views depict a second level education system which deliberately excludes students

<sup>12</sup> The student is at the centre of the model to illustrate the focus of disaffection is placed on the student; it is not a reflection of the significance of the student in the creation of disaffection.

perceived as being outside of the 'norm'. Furthermore, this research provides definite evidence of an education system which has neglected to develop and implement policy which would pro-actively create inclusion within educational practice in second level schools in Galway City. Within an Irish context, policy and programmes have been implemented to reverse the 'move' towards leaving school early but the impact of policy and programmes has been extremely limited. The limitations of policy can be attributed to the focus on changing the individual rather than tackling the system which is facilitating and encouraging the movement of students towards leaving school early.

The development of policy to address the issue of early school leaving needs to focus on the causes of disaffection and the practices of schools. Despite some local influence, policy such as the School Completion Programme has tended to focus on the student and operate on the periphery of the school rather than being an integral part of the daily operation of the school. Thus the responsibility for disaffection is removed from the core practices of the school and placed within a 'periphery' structure. Furthermore, the current focus of education policy on educational disadvantage places the responsibility for disaffection 'outside' the school system. 'Non-school' factors certainly contribute to student 'disadvantage' but these factors, in the main, are viewed as outside the control of the school. As outlined in Chapter Five (Section: Student Profile and Background), 'non-school' factors include the socio-economic profile of the community and family. Schools can, through open and positive engagement with all students (and families), encourage and develop constructive links with the community and its constituents. However, policy needs to focus on the practices of the schools, and the approaches of all those working within it, to ensure all students are fully included and supported within the education system.

The extent to which 'non-school' factors are impacting on students within the education system reiterates the need for agencies and services working in the community to work with schools to promote inclusion. A shift away from a 'culpability culture' between schools and external factors to a real commitment to liaise and work towards a common agenda is required. Effective and mutually beneficial interaction between agencies and schools is essential, facilitating the exchange of knowledge, practices and skills. Effective communication will allow movement away from rhetoric and blame to mutual support with long-term benefits for the student. As with this research, the voice of the student should be facilitated among those, directly or indirectly, supporting the student. The process of centralising the student within the system will provide a focus and commonality,

facilitating a community multi-agency approach to supporting the student to ensure that his/her educational needs are met.

### Policy - Current Performance and Future Development

Reflecting on the critical analysis completed within the literature review (Chapter Two) and the analysis of data (Chapters Four and Five), it has emerged that educational policy, particularly policy aimed at second level education, needs to focus on the development of inclusive practices in which students are valued, encouraged, supported, challenged to reach their potential and treated equally. The process of movement from current policy to the type of policy being suggested within this study will be systemic and long-term. Systemic change can be difficult and slow but the development of inclusive policy and practices in schools has the potential to create equality for students within schools. Equality for all students within the education system can be an extremely strong leverage mechanism for equality within society as a whole. The movement to developing inclusive policies within the education system among policy developers requires leadership, openness, flexibility and an understanding of inclusive education. Moreover, it is these very attributes which should be developed among those involved in delivering education in schools. Furthermore, training needs to challenge the 'middle class' perspectives of teachers. Teachers, and potential teachers, must attain an ability to build relationships with students from all social classes through developing an understanding of the diversity which exists within communities, engaging with students (and parents) as a means of meeting their needs, treating all students equally regardless of socio-economic background and viewing challenging behaviour as a signal of dissatisfaction with the system. Such a process should be initiated at teacher training level and continued through to schools with ongoing support from the Department of Education and Science.

Due to historical links with the Disability Movement, inclusive education has been viewed as being primarily concerned with the area of disability and special educational needs. In an Irish context, inclusive education should be viewed as going beyond special educational needs and progressing to challenging any potential barriers to students' full participation in education. Inclusive education needs to be viewed as a culture of embracing all students regardless of socio-economic background, culture or gender. Furthermore, inclusive education developed on the basis of 'embracing all students' matched with leadership, openness and flexibility will radically reform the Irish education system. While stating that inclusive education is broader than just special educational needs, it is imperative that current legislation, such as the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act

(2004), is implemented and reviewed in order to progress the inclusive education agenda in Ireland. Such legislation, while far from perfect, provides a platform on which those students currently on the periphery of the education system can be included. Furthermore, the evolving nature of 'special education' and 'inclusive education' will reshape future policy and develop upon the EPSEN legislation (2004).

Policy development and policy implementation operate as different processes. These processes remain linked but not interlinked. To ensure coherent and consistent implementation of policy, communication of the rationale for the development of policy should be viewed as the initial stage of the implementation process. The partial or non-implementation of policy can lead to ambivalence, resulting in inefficient and ineffective policy. Ultimately, such partial or non-implementation will result in the intended beneficiaries experiencing dissatisfaction, frustration, vulnerability and marginalisation from society. The key to the development of effective, inclusive education policy will be effective implementation. As suggested in Chapter Two, many of the supports for students at risk of disaffection are provided through a system of targeting. Currently, the Irish education system is operating on the basis of targeting and segregation. This study is suggesting the need to explore a universal education system rather than a targeted education system. Such a system would operate on the basis of working with all students in an equal manner and facilitating students who emerge as requiring further supports. Such a system would reduce labelling, segregation and disaffection within schools and the system generally.

The current propensity of Irish education policy to focus on educational disadvantage above inclusive education creates a further tension within the system. Significant issues have emerged resulting from the focus on educational disadvantage. The targeted approach associated with educational disadvantage places an emphasis on the individual rather than the system. The derivative of such a system is the identification and exclusion of difference rather than the inclusion of all on the basis that everyone is different and everyone has educational needs. However, while education has adopted the targeted approach, it has done so on the basis of the general targeted approach operating within public policy. Therefore, a movement from a targeted to a universal approach is required within public policy. Within such a framework, all are identified as having needs and receiving support, with subsequent specific needs emerging, but no one category or group is targeted specifically.

Inclusive education focuses on a student-centred approach, development of positive relationships between students and teachers, acceptance and welcoming of diversity and the development of solutions to tackle barriers within the system. Inclusive education is an evolving process and one which will be determined by the needs of students within individual schools and the system as a whole. The extent to which inclusive education will be developed within schools in Ireland will be determined by the level of 'added value', to schools, attributed to developing inclusive education practices. 'Added value' includes meeting the needs of clients/students in a more efficient and effective manner, improved resourcing and increased support. All sections of the education system, from those involved in policy development to those implementing it, are aware of disaffection and early school leaving through the behaviour of students or the consistent numbers leaving the education system early. Regardless of one's position within the education system, inclusive education must be explored as an approach which will benefit the system and society as a whole, but most importantly the student.

The development of inclusive education in Ireland will require a shift from a 'culpability culture' to a 'culture of mutual acceptance of responsibility and ability to create change'. The existence of mutual culpability detracts from the implementation of policy and examination of the issues within the education system. It is only when culpability is no longer apportioned to 'another' that a true assessment can take place of 'where we are at' and a vision for progression can be developed. The development of a 'culture of acceptance and ability to create change' among those linked to education, i.e. schools, Department officials and parents, will provide an opportunity for students to achieve their full education potential within the education system. Within this context, the importance of the student voice must also emerge. To date, the hierarchical structure of the education system has not facilitated the student voice. Students are, in effect, 'clients' of the education system and consequently must be involved in the development and restructuring of the system. The ability of students to contribute can be, and is, underestimated. Such underestimation is reflected within the Irish education system in which school personnel retain low expectations of students. Consequently, the level of progression of specific students within the education system is affected.

The reasons for disaffection and early school leaving can be described as a combination of issues including low expectations of teachers and poor relationships between teachers/school management and students. Additionally, policy aimed at tackling early school leaving is operating on the periphery of schools along with a mutual culpability

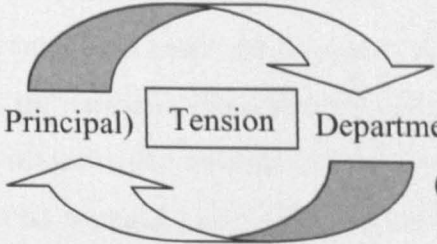
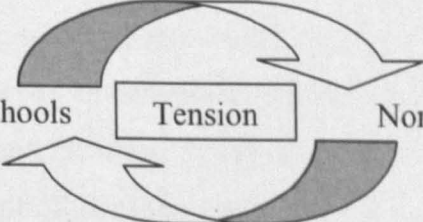
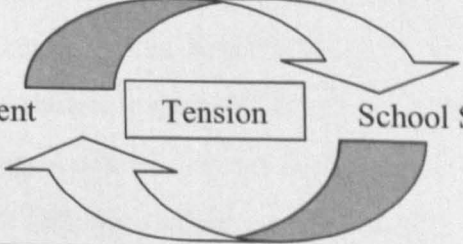


among contributors to the issue of early school leaving. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear definition of inclusion, and the fact that inclusive education is a contested area, difficulties arise in policy development and implementation. While statistics and reports are available in relation to the issue of early school leaving in Ireland, this research provides a greater depth of qualitative data utilising the student voice. As described throughout this research, the views and perspectives of students provide a real view of the Irish education system. In the absence of formal evaluations of current policy, the student voice provides a ‘real’ view of education policy, policy which primarily focuses on the needs of teachers and education personnel rather than the needs of students.

**Tension within the Education System**

Significantly, through this study a contentious issue has emerged which is entrenched in the education system. Tension among, and between, key constituents of the education system emerged as impacting on the ability of the education system to operate in a cohesive manner. Furthermore, such tension is impacting on the ability of national or local policy to effect change within the education system. Tension exists throughout the education system with evidence of three key ‘settings’ of tension. Table 6-2 (overleaf) identifies three setting of tension: 1) Teacher and Principal – Department of Education and Science, 2) Disadvantaged Schools – Non-Disadvantaged Schools and 3) Student – School Staff (Teacher and Principal):

**Table 6-2 - Tension among Key Constituents of Education System**

<p><u>Setting 1</u></p>  <p>School Staff (Teacher and Principal)    Tension    Department of Education and Science (Policy Makers)</p>
<p><u>Setting 2</u></p>  <p>Disadvantaged Schools    Tension    Non-Disadvantaged Schools</p>
<p><u>Setting 3</u></p>  <p>Student    Tension    School Staff (Teacher and Principal)</p>

Through the analysis of data (Chapters Four and Five), in particular the codes and themes which emerged through the grounded codes (Chapter Three), a theory emerged that tension between constituents of the education system is a key contributory factor to disaffection and early school leaving among students. This tension has created a 'vicious circle' environment in which there is an ongoing 'power-control' struggle between the constituents within the education system. In each case, both constituents have the power to impact on the other's experience of the education system. The effectiveness of policy is limited due to the ongoing 'power-control' struggle, a struggle which will impact on the development of inclusive education practices.

Setting 1 refers to tension between School Staff and the Department of Education and Science (Policy Makers). The Department of Education and Science has 'power-control' in relation to funding of teaching hours and staff, resources or supports (special educational needs supports and materials), development of curriculum, development of national policy and overall responsibility for the future of education. School Staff (and management) retain 'power-control' in relation to the implementation of policy, the culture of the school, streaming of students, allocation of teachers and resources within the school, discipline process and inclusion/exclusion of students. Both constituents are attempting to retain or impose a level of 'power-control' over the other. Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of the system must be viewed as a contributing factor to the tension within this setting.

Setting 2 refers to tension between disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools. In this situation, non-disadvantaged schools are in a position of 'power-control' to include and exclude students from the school. Non-disadvantaged schools are in a position to attract and select students with low risk of disaffection. Conversely, disadvantaged schools are limited in their ability to include and exclude students. However, disadvantaged schools are provided with a greater level of state funding than non-disadvantaged schools. Disadvantaged schools have power, control and resources to provide increased levels of support to students at risk of disaffection through training and resources from the Department of Education and Science. Both constituents are attempting to retain or impose a level of 'power-control' over the other. To further illustrate the existence of such tension, and the contributions this study will make to the body of knowledge, in July 2009 a Vocational Education Committee on behalf of a disadvantaged school took a case to a high court in Ireland. A student expelled from a non-disadvantaged school was being 'offloaded' to a disadvantaged school. The Department of Education and Science ruled the disadvantaged school must take the student. However, Mr. Justice Daniel O'Keefe found

that the Department of Education and Science's appeals committee did not have the right to compel a school to take on a difficult or disruptive student expelled by another school (Hughes, 2009). The long-term effects of this ruling are unclear. However, the findings of this research illustrate similar tension and concerns exist in Galway City between disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools.

Setting 3 relates to tension between the student and the teacher/principal. Teachers and principals have 'power-control' in relation to influencing the culture of the school, streaming of students, allocation of teachers, discipline process, suspension and exclusion of students. Each of these factors can, individually and collectively, have a fundamental impact on the educational experience of the student. Conversely, students have 'power-control' in relation to attending school, engaging with teachers, engaging with the discipline process of school, influencing the culture of the school and participating in the assessment process. Both constituents are attempting to retain or impose a level of 'power-control' over the other. Furthermore, tension is perpetuated due to the differing values and cultural backgrounds between students and teachers/principals.

The existence of such tension throughout the education system directly, and indirectly, impacts on the development and implementation of policy, delivery of curriculum, support for students, support for teachers, access to resources and ultimately the extent of 'inclusion' within the education system. From the viewpoint of this study, the effectiveness of national policy is negatively impacted upon by the tension which exists within the Irish education system. The long-term effectiveness of any education related policy will be dependent on the 'release of tension' from the system. Central to this release will be the reduction of the 'level of division' between the Department of Education and Science and schools. The 'ownership' of schools is central to this issue but the need for a collaborative approach is evident. School management and the Department of Education and Science must create a system of formal collaboration which facilitates both parties' involvement in policy development and implementation, rather than the current system in which the Department of Education and Science develops policy and schools implement policy.

Such formal collaboration will allow 'ownership' of policy and reduce the power struggle, tension, level of culpability and barriers to the creation of a multi-agency/community approach. Parallel processes of collaborations are required within the other two locations of tension, i.e. between disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools and between

students and teachers/principals. The provision of formal links between disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools should be facilitated by the Department of Education and Science through a process of communication, sharing of information, knowledge and concerns. National and local policy can be developed which reflects and meets the needs of both disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools. The process of collaboration between students and teachers/principals will require both a national and local focus. National policy needs to focus on teacher training, promotion of inclusive practices and developing teachers' expectations. Local policy will require local agencies, community groups and institutions to work closely with schools to support students, and families, through the education system.

Interconnected with the tension described previously is the view of the education system, more specifically second level schools, as a mechanism for social class division. Principals and teachers, through practice and policy, are retaining power over students. Such power emerges from the predominance of middle class backgrounds among principals and teachers. Consciously, or sub-consciously, schools are supporting the middle class and suffocating the lower class. This system of humiliation and intimidation of students from lower class backgrounds is jeopardising students' participation in the education system. Challenging schools, and the education system, to shift from its entrenchment within the middle class is an enormous undertaking. Such an undertaking encompasses society and public policy, rather than just the education system. A political shift towards a truly inclusive society which values the lower classes and diversity will be required. However, such a shift can, and will only, happen over time. Local and community based initiatives must drive this agenda forward. A shift in perspective is required, a shift which reduces the tension and clash of cultures in schools and the education system. A shift in perspective is also required in relation to the purpose of schools and education; rather than focusing on academic success alone a move is required towards the development of students as active citizens within society. A shift in perspective is required, a shift which develops the confidence, self worth and self value of all students rather than a system which facilitates failure and exclusion, a shift which places the education system as the advocate of inclusion and a mechanism for equality within society.

### **Local Development of Inclusive Education**

The rationale for the commencement of this study focused on critically examining inclusive education, disaffection among early school leavers and current policy operating

in the Irish education system. The study focused on establishing the reasons why students leave school prior to completing the Leaving Certificate in Galway City. The study was completed through a process of critical analysis of relevant literature and completing primary research with students and key personnel associated with early school leaving, including teachers, principals, other policy implementers and policy makers. Galway City has been used as a research location within this investigation to critically analyse national policy. Conversely, Galway City must now be viewed as a location to develop and examine inclusive education policy and practice within a second level school setting.

The research emphasises that disaffection and early school leaving are significant issues within the Irish education system. The impact of current policy on disaffection and early school leaving is extremely limited due to the complex nature of disaffection, the existence of tension and a 'culpability culture', socio-economic factors and the segregated structure of the education system. The development of effective policy, inclusive practices, reduced tension and 'culpability culture' within the education system will only be achieved through formal collaboration among the key parties, i.e. the Department and schools. A formal inter-agency collaborative approach among agencies and services working externally to the education system is also required to effect real change. The above collaborations should aim to promote a social model of thinking through the use of inclusive language, reduce deficit models of thinking and focus on working from the student agenda rather than the agenda of the teacher, school or Department of Education and Science.

With this in mind, a 'pilot' project should be developed, in Galway City, in which a specific number of second level schools would develop and implement inclusive practices and policies. Such a project will require support from various agencies based in the city, including the Area Based Partnership; in particular, support from those involved in leadership within schools, such as Boards of Management and principals, will be required. The project should operate over a five-year period with a research and theoretical framework. There will be two key aims to the project: 1) Develop and evaluate inclusive education policy and practices within second level schools, 2) Develop a model for dissemination of the evaluation findings to schools throughout Ireland. While fully acknowledging the complex nature of such a project, the following is the framework in which a process can be developed:

- Phase One - Developing on the findings of this study, an initial detailed critical analysis of current policy and practice should be completed among, at a minimum, three second level schools,

- Phase Two - Based on the critical analysis, a 'change' phase should be initiated. This phase will involve schools and the key 'parties' connected with the school, including external agencies, developing and agreeing to implement 'new' inclusive policies and practices,
- Phase Three - Implementing inclusive policies and practices in a school setting over a sustained period of time with the required resources and supports in place,
- Phase Four - A formal critical analysis of the inclusive policy and practice within the schools,
- Phase Five - The development of a model of inclusion within a school setting which will be disseminated at local and national level as a means of effecting change within national policy.

The inclusive education agenda, through the Disability Movement, has progressed on the basis of the following characteristics: innovation, challenging current thinking, development of alternative models and creating a 'better society'. The view taken within this study is that national policy can be influenced through implementing the above characteristics at a local level. Through the development of a local model of inclusion and inclusive education, national policy and current models of thinking within Irish education can be challenged.

### **Inclusive Methodologies and Student Involvement**

The inclusive methodological approach employed within the study has attempted to ensure that the perspectives of key personnel were ascertained. The inclusion of teachers, principals, students and key personnel involved in education has facilitated differing views and perspectives to emerge. Of particular importance was the inclusion of the voice of the students, a voice which has been excluded heretofore within education practice and research. Students, and the student voice, have been the 'foundation' of this research process. Through listening to the student voice, the study and I (as a researcher) have acquired a depth of knowledge of their experiences within the education system and insight into their lives generally. The lack of inclusion of the student voice within the Irish education system impacts on the ineffectiveness of education policy. The changes to policy development and implementation recommended within this study must focus on the needs of the student. Furthermore, changes to policy development and implementation should allow students to voice their views, opinions and recommendations.

The research process has unearthed the complexities within the area of educational disadvantage and inclusive education. Due to the limitations of this study, these complexities could not be fully explored. Therefore, through this research the need for further research has emerged. The issue of streaming is explored within the research, however specific research is required to establish the extent to which such practices exist within the Irish education system and the impact such an approach has on the expectations of students and teachers. Furthermore, the role of parents and family in relation to education is well documented and outlined within this study (Chapter Five, Section: Student Profile and Background). However, further exploration is required into the young person as a student and the young person as a member of a family or community. There is a need for an exploration of the extent to which behaviour manifested in school is specific to a school setting. Such an exploration would allow a detailed analysis and comparison of the behaviour of a young person in a school setting and the young person in a family or community setting. The balance of male and female participation among the students reflects the current profile of early school leaving in Ireland. However, there is a need to explore the rationale for such gender difference within early school leaving in Ireland.

### **Personal Reflection**

The process and completion of this research has impacted profoundly upon me as a person and as a professional. On a personal level, my view of education, local communities and people has developed immeasurably. The insular and restricted view of the world, which I retained prior to completing this research, has been replaced with a greater appreciation of the complexities which exist in the world. Such complexities within topics and among people, I now believe, add a great richness to society. My worldview and perspective have expanded, an expansion which has enriched me as a person. However, the greater appreciation of the complexities surrounding people, communities and society ensures all future issues, personal or otherwise, are viewed as complex and require a depth of analysis previously perceived to be unnecessary. Knowledge and understanding are tremendous attributes, attributes which I have accessed through the completion of this study. As a result of acquiring these attributes, there is a challenge to develop an appreciation among others of the existence of these attributes while simultaneously retaining a personal belief in the benefits of same.

On a professional level, the process and completion of this study has proved both enlightening and challenging. My understanding and knowledge of 'education' has developed to such an extent that it casts doubt on my levels of understanding and

knowledge prior to beginning this process. My professional practice and ability has, in my opinion, developed significantly. Through this process, I moved out of my 'comfort zone' and gained a greater understanding of the key concepts involved in education, nationally and internationally, as well as the importance of theoretical and research frameworks. In addition, a greater level of empathy has been achieved for the key constituents within the education system, in particular for the students; all of which stress the importance of professional development and research enquiry within educational practice.

The process has not only developed my ability to complete research but also my confidence to complete research. Furthermore, I now believe I am in a position to significantly effect changes in relation to educational practice and policy in Galway City, including the promotion of practitioner research within education settings. Moreover, the findings, conclusions and recommendations which have emerged through this study, the first of its kind in Galway City, provide a platform for communication, in relation to practice and policy, with second levels schools in Galway City.

## Conclusion

In the context of developing a theoretical framework for tackling disaffection and early school leaving through a critical examination of policy addressing early school leaving, Chapter Six has drawn together the findings from the study (Chapters Four and Five) and developed recommendations for future policy. Viewing a theoretical framework as an identification of a problem and the development of solution for that problem, Chapters Two, Four and Five have developed a detailed description of disaffection, early school leaving and related policy in Galway City. Disaffection and early school leaving continue to exist due to factors relating to current education policy (development and implementation), students, schools and a 'culpability culture' within the education system. Furthermore, the problem of disaffection and early school leaving is fuelled by intricate tension which exist within the education system. Feasible solutions for tackling disaffection and early school leaving have been developed within Chapter Six including the need to move towards an inclusive education system through the development of a multi-agency approach in which there is a shift away from a 'culpability culture' to a common agenda. Moreover, student needs must be placed at the centre of the education system, a system which needs to move away from tackling educational disadvantage to promoting inclusion of all students within the education system.



Through the data analysis in Chapter Four and Five, the study demonstrates that disaffection and early school leaving are significant issues within the Irish education system. Disaffection as outlined within the data analysis, while complex in its structure, is identifiable among students through characteristics such as aggressive behaviour, disrupted attendance, poor relationships with teachers, lack of interest and non-engagement in academic processes. The factors established within this research reflect the profile of disaffection as described within the literature review (Chapter Two). Furthermore, the contextual issues of socio-economic and cultural factors within families and communities emerged. In addition, the research established that current policy aimed at tackling early school leaving is working on the periphery of schools rather than implementing and promoting inclusive practices within schools.

The research also established the existence of two original factors which are contributing to the issue of disaffection. The first is tension within the education system. The following contribute to such tension: clash of cultures and 'power-control' struggle among teachers and students; 'power-control' struggle between disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools; 'power-control' struggle between schools and the Department of Education and Science; and a propensity within policy towards addressing educational disadvantage rather than promoting inclusive education. The second factor is a 'culpability culture' among those who contribute to disaffection and the issue of early school leaving. Education policy makers, students and schools have created a culture of culpability, a culture in which each places blame on another for the issue of disaffection. The continued existence of such further cultivates disaffection from the education system. Overall this study has shown the ongoing issues which exist within second level education in Ireland. Furthermore, the study has identified the need for change within the system. The development of policy and practices in the Irish education system to meet the needs of all students will require time, energy, vision, forward thinking and political support.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix One - Examples of Second Level Educational Disadvantage Initiatives**

### **Home School Community Liaison Scheme**

The Scheme is delivered through a co-ordinator (teacher), who is assigned to a school or group of schools. The aims of the scheme are

- 1) To maximise active participation of the children in the schools of the scheme in the learning process, in particular those who might be at risk of failure.
- 2) To promote active cooperation between home, school and relevant community agencies in promoting the educational interests of the children.
- 3) To raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills.
- 4) To enhance the children's uptake from education, their retention in the education system, their continuation to post-compulsory education and to third level and their attitudes to life-long learning and
- 5) To disseminate the positive outcomes of the scheme throughout the school system generally.

The scheme is concerned with establishing partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of the child's learning. The role of the individual coordinator is to work with school staff, parents and relevant community agencies in advancing these aims. A National Co-ordinator and two assistant co-ordinators oversee the day-to-day operation of the Scheme.

### **School Development Planning Initiative (SDP)**

*School Development and Planning (SDP) at first and second level:* A key aspect of the SDP initiative is to assist disadvantaged schools in developing strategies for combating educational disadvantage, enhancing school retention, promoting social inclusion and strengthening the interface between the local school and the wider community

### **Education of Non-nationals**

Post-primary schools with an enrolment of fourteen or more non-national students with English language deficits are entitled to an additional teacher to address the needs of these students. An individual student is entitled to a maximum of two years language support. These teacher appointments are temporary, due to the transient nature of the non-national student population. In the case of a school having twenty-eight or more non-English speaking non-nationals, the school is entitled to a second additional teacher.



### Special Needs

Children of second level age with milder forms of disability are generally catered for on an integrated basis in mainstream post-primary schools. Such students are supported by special support teachers and/or special needs assistants. The level of need is based on the assessed needs of the individual student. Children with more serious disabilities are catered for in special schools or special classes attached to ordinary schools. All such facilities operate at specially reduced pupil teacher ratios which are in line with the levels recommended by the Special Education Review Committee.

### Curricular Reform

A critical aim of the reforms is to enhance the relevance of the curriculum to emerging economic and social needs, to provide a range of choices which cater for diverse needs, interest and abilities of the school population and to encourage more young people to remain within the system to completion of senior cycle second level education.

### National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (Primary and Post-Primary)

NEPS has delegated authority to develop and provide an educational psychological service to all students in primary and post-primary schools and in certain other centres supported by the Department, paying particular attention to those with special educational needs. The service is provided on an integrated basis to primary and post-primary schools, to allow for the tracking of children throughout their school career. NEPS psychologists are located throughout the country in 10 regions corresponding to the Health Board regions in order to facilitate co-operation with the psychological services provided by the Health Boards and Voluntary Bodies. It is intended that there will be offices in approximately 20 locations around the country so that each team of psychologists will be located near the schools it serves.

(Department of Education and Science (2001) *Summary of All Initiatives Funded By the Department to help Alleviate Educational Disadvantage*, accessed through [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

## **Appendix Two - Letter to Local Service**

Address and Date

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Seamus Morrissey and as you may be aware I am currently working as an Education Co-ordinator with Galway City Partnership. Outside of my position with Galway City Partnership, I am currently pursuing a Doctorate in Education. The working title of the Doctorate is as follows: Government policies/ strategies effective in addressing early school leaving in Galway City? A critical examination of inclusion, diversity and disaffection with early school leavers in Galway, Ireland.

As part of the research for this Doctorate, I wish to interview young people who are involved with your service. With the above in mind, I would really welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this research further along with the possibility of your service becoming involved through identifying young people to participate in the research. The key selection criteria are that the young people to be included have attended a second level school in Galway and did not complete the Leaving Certificate.

I would be grateful if you contact me at the above address or phone number.

With the level of demands on your time, I appreciate the fact that you have taken the time to read this letter.

Yours Sincerely,

---

Seamus Morrissey

### **Appendix Three - Letter to Local Second Level Schools**

Address and Date

Dear Principal,

My name is Seamus Morrissey and I work with Galway City Partnership. I am currently pursuing a Doctorate in Education. The working title of the Doctorate is as follows: Government policies/ strategies effective in addressing early school leaving in Galway? A critical examination of inclusion, diversity and disaffection with early school leavers in Galway, Ireland. As part of this research I wish to interview principals and a sample of teachers within second level schools in Galway City.

If you agree to participate I will come to interview you at your convenience. Our conversation will take up to one hour and I will record our conversation. The questions I will be asking relate to the effectiveness of policies/ strategies in addressing the issue of leaving school early. All the information that I obtain will be kept confidential. I will store the recording of our conversation in a secure location. Your identity will be kept confidential. I will use a code number on your recording and will keep your name and code number in a separate place.

You may access your individual interview recordings at any time. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your data from the study up until the work is published. Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part and you may refuse to answer any questions. If you are willing to participate in the research I would be grateful if you would call me on (086) .....

Yours Sincerely,

---

Seamus Morrissey

#### **Appendix Four - Letter to Education Personnel**

Address and Date

Dear Sir/ Madam,

My name is Seamus Morrissey and as you may be aware I am currently working as an Education Co-ordinator with Galway City Partnership. Outside of my position with Galway City Partnership, I am currently pursuing a Doctorate in Education. The working title of the Doctorate is as follows: Government policies/ strategies effective in addressing early school leaving in Galway? A critical examination of inclusion, diversity and disaffection with early school leavers in Galway, Ireland.

As part of the research for this Doctorate, I would welcome the opportunity to interview Departmental Officials involved in education, particularly those involved in tackling early school leaving. With the above in mind, I would be in a position to meet with you to discuss this research further along with the possibility of you and other departmental officials becoming involved in the research. I would be grateful if you would contact me at the above address or phone number.

With the level of demands on your time, I appreciate the fact that you have taken the time to read this letter.

Yours Sincerely,

---

Seamus Morrissey

## **Appendix Five - Interview Questions**

### **Student Voice**

#### **Demographics/ Personal Details**

1. What age are you?
2. Where are you living at the moment?
3. Who is living with you?
4. What part of the city do you live in?

#### **Primary School**

5. What aspects of primary school did you enjoy most? Why?
6. What aspects of primary school did you enjoy least? Why?
7. Did you feel you fitted in at primary school?
8. How would you like to have happened in school but didn't happen?
9. Describe your behaviour when you were in primary school?
10. Did you feel you got support from the school staff when you were in primary school?
11. What was your attendance record like?

#### **Secondary School**

12. What aspects of secondary school did you enjoy most? Why?
13. What aspects did you enjoy least? Why?
14. Did you feel you fitted in at secondary school?
15. Describe your behaviour when you were in secondary school?
16. What was your attendance record like?
17. What did you do when you weren't at school?
18. Did you feel you got support when you were in secondary school?
19. What would someone need to be like to do well in school?
20. In what way did your primary school experience differ from your secondary school experience?

#### **School Leaving**

21. What academic year did you complete before leaving school?
22. Describe the reasons why you left school?
23. Did anyone try and stop you from leaving school?
24. When you think of school staff do you think they helped you enough when you were in school?
25. When you finished school how did you feel?

#### **Education**

26. Are you working or involved in education at the moment?
27. Did you learn any skills (work or personal) at school which you would consider useful now?
28. What would have been useful for you to learn at school?

## **School**

### **Job Responsibility**

1. What is your current position?
2. What are your key responsibilities?

### **School Profile/ Philosophy**

3. What is the ethos of your school?
4. Could you describe the student profile of your second level school?

### **Selection of Students**

5. Approximately how many students in the school would you identify as having special educational needs?
6. On what basis are pupils allocated to classes? Alphabetically/ randomly, performance in ore-entry, performance in post-entry test? Exam performance?

### **Supports for Students**

7. Outline any government projects or initiatives which are in existence in the school?
8. How have these projects benefited the school and the students?
9. What types of supports are in place for students in your school?
10. How do you designate support to the students?
11. Are students withdrawn from the class for resource hours/ support?
12. Could you describe any other education resources or services the school provides to the pupils?

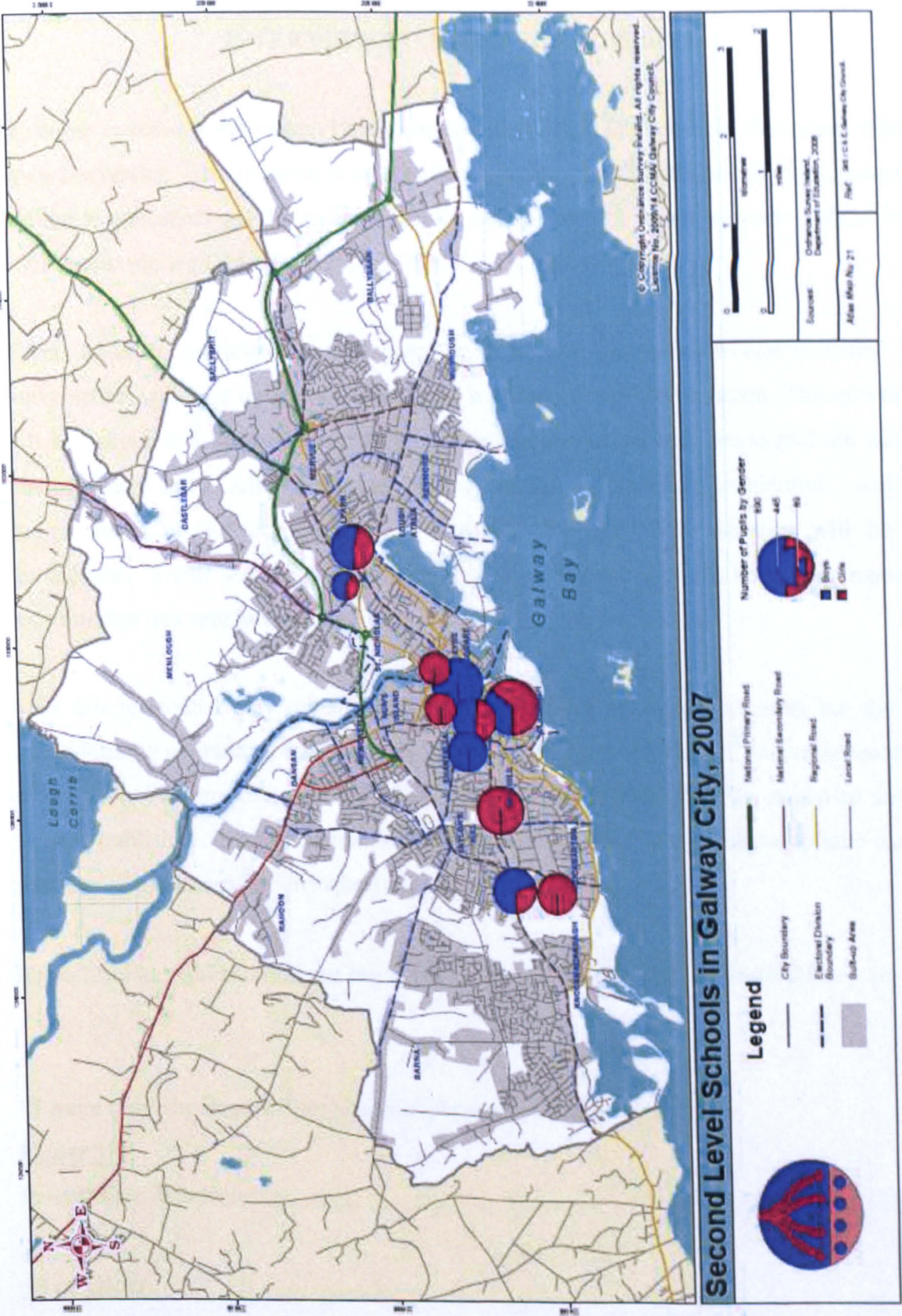
### **Curriculum and Teaching**

13. Describe the types of subjects being taught within the school?
14. How do the subjects on offer in the school influence the profile of students entering the school?
15. What expectations do the teachers have of the students?
16. What are the key skills required to engage students in learning?
17. Outline any innovative teaching methods which have been operating within the school?

### **Students at risk of Early School Leaving**

18. To what extent do students identified as requiring supports benefit from and enjoy second level education?
19. Please outline the profiles of students who are disaffected from the education system?
20. In your opinion why do students leave school early?
21. Could you outline any policies in the school to ensure the inclusion of young people at risk of disaffection within the school?
22. What specific approaches are utilised within the school to retain all students within the school?
23. Have such approaches been successful? Please outline any examples of good practice?
24. Are there any changes you believe that should be made at policy levels to retain students within the system?
25. Describe what should the key elements of such policies be?
26. Any other comments/ suggestions?

# Appendix Six - Map of Second Level Schools in Galway City





## **Appendix Seven - Consent Forms**

### **INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM - Student**

My name is Seamus Morrissey. I am currently pursuing a Doctorate in Education with the Open University. The research is an investigation into the experiences of young people in relation to education and the issue of leaving school early. I would be very grateful if you would assist me with this research.

If you agree to participate I will come to interview you at your convenience. Our conversation will take up to one hour and I will record our conversation. The questions I will be asking will be in relation to your experiences around education and the issue of leaving school early. All the information that I obtain will be kept confidential. I will store the recording of our conversation in a secure location. Your identity will be kept confidential. I will use a code number on your recording and will keep your name and code number in a separate place.

After this research I may use the recordings and notes for future research, but the same confidentiality guarantees will apply. You may access your individual interview recordings at any time. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your data from the study up until the work is published. Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part and you may refuse to answer any questions.

If you have any questions about the research you may call me, Seamus Morrissey, on (08.)

.....

**"I have read the description above and consent to participate."**

#### **Under 18**

Parent/ Guardian signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### **18 or Older**

Interviewee signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM - Adult**

My name is Seamus Morrissey. I am currently pursuing a Doctorate in Education with the Open University. The research is an investigation into the experiences of young people in relation to education and the issue of leaving school early. I would be very grateful if you would assist me with this research.

If you agree to participate I will come to interview you at your convenience. Our conversation will take up to one hour and I will record our conversation. The questions I will be asking will be in relation to your experiences around education and the issue of leaving school early. All the information that I obtain will be kept confidential. I will store the recording of our conversation in a secure location. Your identity will be kept confidential. I will use a code number on your recording and will keep your name and code number in a separate place.

After this research I may use the recordings and notes for future research, but the same confidentiality guarantees will apply. You may access your individual interview recordings at any time. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your data from the study up until the work is published. Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part and you may refuse to answer any questions.

If you have any questions about the research you may call me, Seamus Morrissey, on (08.)  
.....

**"I have read the description above and consent to participate."**

Interviewee signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_